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Boiling the Ocean: A Novel

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Boiling the Ocean: A Novel

by

David Mihalyov

**A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York
College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts


April 16, 2003

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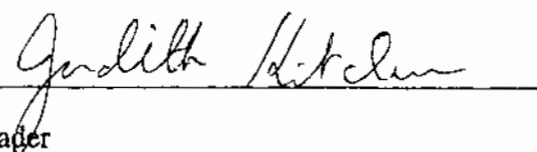
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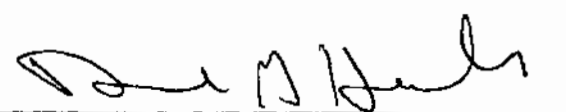
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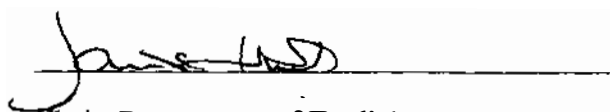
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Abstract

Boiling the Ocean is a novel about obsessions, and how those obsessions drive people to act in ways that ultimately hurt them. The novel revolves around three main characters, one of whom is The Avenger, a pseudo super-hero who tries to right perceived wrongs. It is a story about the relationship between brothers and the woman they are both attracted to. Two of the characters work at a newspaper and the novel shows scenes of how a newsroom operates, from both an editorial and reporting view. *Boiling the Ocean* also touches on corporate greed and malfeasance, and how that negatively impacts employees.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Works Cited	20
Chapter 1	22
Chapter 2	41
Chapter 3	52
Chapter 4	66
Chapter 5	85
Chapter 6	101
Chapter 7	118
Chapter 8	139
Chapter 9	155
Chapter 10	173
Chapter 11	188
Chapter 12	204
Chapter 13	225
Chapter 14	244
Chapter 15	261

Secrets and Obsessions

Introduction

Secrets and obsessions: two themes that naturally accompany each other in literature. Secrets can lead to the obsession of discovery and obsession in turn can lead to keeping secrets. Obsessive characters can make for great reading and can give the author a chance to stretch his or her abilities by pushing closer to the edge. Some of the ideas I want to explore, both in this introduction and within my novel, include the appeal of obsessive characters, what readers expect from both the character and the author, how secrets can lead to obsession, and what the cost of obsession is for the character.

Secrets and obsession play a major role in my novel, *Boiling the Ocean*. One of the characters, Todd, takes on the persona of The Avenger – an everyman “super-hero” who tries to avenge perceived wrongs. As The Avenger receives increased publicity, Todd at first finds himself living for the high he gets from being The Avenger, and then he realizes he needs to keep upping the stakes. Although the Bible states “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord,” if fiction writers took that message to heart then a large amount of literature would never have been written. Few characters leave the vengeance to someone else; most try to enact it themselves.

Another character in my novel, Karen, is a newspaper reporter who becomes obsessed with discovering who The Avenger is, so much so that she risks her career when believing she is close to unearthing his identity. Karen happens to be friends with Todd, who for a large portion of the book enjoys toying with Karen about her obsession with The Avenger.

The third main character in my novel is Todd's brother Matt, who is a copy editor at the same newspaper Karen works at. Matt is infatuated with both Karen, romantically, and The Avenger, as a hero, and is content to sit on the sidelines for most of the novel and not take an active role in his life.

All three characters interact throughout the novel in a shifting narrative that attempts to discuss obsession from a variety of angles. I have tried to understand how obsessions alter and dictate the terms on which these characters live. Each of them struggle with how much to let their obsession control their lives.

While reading John Gardner's essay "Moral Criticism," I came across a passage that seemed appropriate to the discussion of obsession: "Knowledge may or may not lead to belief; understanding always does, since to believe one understands a complex situation is to form at least a tentative theory of how one ought to behave in it" (139). Understanding how to behave is a problem for my characters, and is the crux of most fiction. The enjoyment for the reader comes when the author has done a commendable job of allowing the characters to struggle toward this understanding.

Choosing a Genre

I tried to determine which – out of fiction, poetry and memoir – was most suitable for my discussion of secrets and obsessions. My natural inclination was fiction, which is the majority of what I write, but I thought it important to think through

which genre would best fit the themes I wanted to explore. I have never attempted to write serious personal essays so memoir was not an obvious choice. Maybe, as with other writers I know who work in fiction, I don't find my life compelling enough to make for a vibrant book. Not to mention that if a memoirist comes across as too obsessive the reader might hold it against the author, or not believe it as readily as with a fictional character. Memoir can make the reader uncomfortable in a way that fiction does not. We can and should be repulsed by what Humbert does in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, but we still cut him some slack, partly because of his humorous observations and asides and partly because we know he is a literary creation. If this were a 'real' scenario, for instance if memoirist Mark Spragg were a pedophile, we would not have the same sympathy for the narrator. Conversely, because the reader understands that fiction is for the most part "made up," I believe the author of a novel can go beyond that which in real life would make us pause. Thus I believe that fiction can be used more effectively than memoir to discuss and understand obsession. Another point for fiction in this scorecard is that we don't know how a novel is going to end. With memoir, if nothing else we know that the narrator survived to write the book.

I believe it would be difficult for me to discuss obsession through poetry. Although I have written a number of poems over the years, once I write a poem about a particular subject I tend to want to move in a different direction. I have rarely been able to write multiple poems discussing a similar theme, so the idea of discussing obsession through poetry was not going to work for me. I don't believe I could have effectively built and revealed – even in a book of poems – the in-depth look at obsessive behavior that I sought.

Which brings me to fiction. Margaret Atwood's book, *The Blind Assassin*, is for me a great example of using the novel format to look at obsession. Atwood uses a

novel-within-a-novel, two sisters and the lover they unknowingly share to show how secrets and obsessions shape the lives of the characters.

Although I earlier dismissed memoir and poetry as my ideal vehicles with which to discuss obsession, they are still quite capable of providing insight into the idea. Mark Spragg shows us his own obsessions in the essay “Wintering.” Here Spragg allows that after graduating from college he was basically sick of being around people and away from his beloved landscape so he holes up in a ranch for the winter with the only contact being an old woman living nearby. In the opening essay, “In Praise of Horses,” Spragg tells us he was obsessed with horses, “When I was separated from them I felt wrong in the world” (5). In the essay “Adopting Bear,” Spragg tells us that when he was eleven he wanted to become a bear: “When I found their track I slipped off my boots and socks and stood barefoot and silent where they had stood. [. . .] I still imagine that I can stand with a foot in their world. But at night I know I am slowly growing into a man” (182). We can guess by the book’s later essays that Spragg’s obsession with the natural world has not successfully allowed him to live in the “real” world. All of the essays leading up to “Wintering” show us that the world Spragg wanted to inhabit was the dream world of a teenager and not the reality of a man.

Poet Andrea Hollander Budy is obsessed with the other life, and she wants to understand about the un-lived life, the world of the poem. In her title poem, “The Other Life,” Budy writes, “[. . .] the other life/wanting you only/to want it,/to keep it known” (41). She finishes the poem by writing, “Or your heart which beats/only in the other life, the life/you covet and protect,/the one you invent and invent/because it invents you back.” This obsession with the other life is one virtually everyone has experienced at one time. We all dream of what we would be doing differently if only we had said yes instead of no, majored in this subject rather than that one. This focus on the other life is the stuff of regret.

Ultimately I chose the novel as the most appropriate vehicle for my look at obsession. Perhaps novels best suit my temperament, or maybe I am unable to distill an idea to its essence in a way that a poem demands; whatever the reason, I feel most comfortable wrapping my figurative arms around a novel.

Secrets and Obsessions in Novels

Two novels I want to discuss revolve around obsession and secrets, albeit in radically different forms. Nabokov's *Lolita*, and *Headlong*, by Michael Frayn, both describe the downfall of a protagonist who carries his obsession to a ruinous degree. One, *Lolita*'s obsessively named Humbert Humbert, was flawed from the beginning, and the other, *Headlong*'s Martin Clay, developed his obsession due to circumstances he found himself in.

Both Nabokov and Frayn start their respective novels with the narrator in the present preparing to go back in time and tell us their stories. In other words, they both know how the action has turned out before beginning the tale. Frayn even has his protagonist, Martin, give us a warning: "My tone's going to sound inappropriately light-minded at times. But that's the way it was. The tone of most of the things we do in life is probably going to turn out to have been painfully unsuitable in the light of what happens later" (4). Nabokov begins Humbert's narration with a simple line, "*Lolita*, light of my fire, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul" (9). We immediately understand that *Lolita* is everything to Humbert – both his salvation and his downfall. Early in the novel Humbert refers to his obsession with young girls as the after-effects of a summer romance with Annabel when he was about twelve years of age. "[. . .] the poison was in the wound, and the wound remained ever open" (18). Humbert tries

to make us believe that his obsession with young girls is an injury, something that happened to him. In other words, not something that he was responsible for.

In my novel, Todd makes a conscious choice to become The Avenger. The obsession develops as he gets more involved and he is unable to extricate himself before someone dies. He may have nurtured thoughts for years about how certain deeds go unpunished but it wasn't until he began to act that obsession kicked in.

As is often the case, secrets are both found within and can lead to obsession. There are two kinds of secrets someone holds. The first is the secret that someone tells you, which you are entrusted to keep. The second is the secret where you know information that others don't realize you know. My hope is that compelling literature can be created when obsession comes into play by trying to discover the secrets that others know.

A book I recently read that fits closely with themes of obsession and secrets is *Reading in the Dark*. Seamus Deane's novel is filled with the obsession of keeping and discovering secrets. The narrator is seen growing up within an Irish family that has skeletons in its closet that our narrator is determined to discover. For most of the novel we, along with the narrator, are attempting to figure out the truth of what happened years before the novel's action begins. As the narrator finds out more details he becomes obsessed not only with knowing what others knew, but wondering when they learned it. For example, he wanted to know how much his mother knew when she married his father. Deane uses the mother to summarize what most of the characters feel about secrets: "I want you to know now, I never want you to know, I never want you to want to know, I never want to know if you do know" (134). Ultimately, Deane told us on the first page the biggest issue in the novel when the mother said, "There's

something there between us. A shadow. Don't move" (3). There was something between all of the characters and moving, if we can read moving as trying to understand, only made it worse. The irony is that while everyone was trying to protect others from knowledge, their secrecy ended up causing more pain than the knowledge would have. Gardner wrote, "[. . .] our understanding of technique and our ability to evaluate it enhance our appreciation of what the artist has done. [. . .] Ideals are art's *ends*; the rest is methodology" (132-33). So what has Deane done? He has shown us an example of when knowing the truth and family harmony collide. That he has not provided a happy ending is being truthful to how real life is. Deane was being true to the lives he created, even though those lives remained filled with pain that no amount of truth could salve.

Secrets and obsessions – together and separate – can lead to a ruinous conclusion if not held in check. Humbert knew that his actions would put him in jail and he was powerless to stop himself. Martin understood that his marriage and family life could end if he continued to chase a previously undiscovered painting by Pieter Bruegel, but he, like Humbert, was unable to rein himself in. Why do characters, and by extension their authors, allow this to happen? Is it a feeling of inevitability, a sense of predestination, the idea that they would do something to stop themselves if they could but it's out of their control? Would we as readers want these characters to stop themselves? Isn't part of the vicarious thrill of reading to watch others do things that we can only imagine? How satisfying would a book be if the characters and plot happened as we live our lives? We want something larger than life, and by going one or two steps past societal norms, the Humberts and Martins of the fictional world both provide lurid thrills and allow us to feel better about ourselves.

In my book, Todd experiences firsthand the cycle an out-of-control obsessive goes through. At first he loves the attention lavished on him by the media and public.

He's different and they love him for it. He believes it is because he is doing something that most people would like to do, but are unable to, either because of societal pressures or personal barriers. But the deeper he gets the more expectations are thrust upon him. The public – seen through Matt – wants more, and the media – seen through Karen – wants more. Todd feels the need to up the stakes, which ultimately results in a death. My struggle was to come up with scenarios for Todd that were realistic for the purposes of the novel, but that would seem larger than life if we stepped out of the book.

Writers and Obsession

One of the many challenges the author faces is to provide readers with an entertaining look at obsession through harnessing his or her own obsessive traits. In the essay, "From Obsession to Imagination: The Psychology of the Writer," Harry Levin writes, "If the writer succeeds in manifesting his autonomy, it is through such transference from obsession to imagination" (202). It's natural for writers to write about obsession if only because writers themselves need to act somewhat obsessive to write in the first place. The character created by the author is not always autobiographical, but the author obviously has to have the creativity and imagination to dream up the obsessive traits that he or she gives his or her characters. Robertson Davies believes that authors write about obsession, "[. . .] not because it is an obvious part of their own nature, but because it is a possibility which they are capable of seizing and bringing to a fictional life" (203). And the writer must have the discipline, or obsessiveness, to sit down and write. All writers have a different pattern for how and when they write, but I believe it's safe to say that each author serious about writing, to various degrees, locks out family, friends, and the rest of the "real" world in order to

create. As Levin writes, “The serious practice of writing imposes a single-mindedness which might well be regarded as a monomania of sorts” (190). It’s only natural to for a writer, who likely doesn’t consider himself abnormal, to transfer some of his obsessive nature to his characters.

The line of demarcation when writing about obsession can be fuzzy for the author. Keeping the reader interested without going too far is a delicate balance to strike. And, as Levin notes, not every author uses his or her own obsession the same way. “[. . .] the greatest genius may be the man who has surmounted his obsessions and put them to work. Some of the most striking and original writers, on the other hand, are those whose inbred obsessions seem untempered, unresolved, and uncompromised” (191).

So, the struggling author knows he has an obsession with writing and he wants to write about themes of obsession. Should he try to channel his obsession into his art or should he simply cut loose and let the words fly where they may? Annie Dillard believes that authors should *not* do whatever they want in wanton disregard of craft. “Your freedom as a writer is not freedom of expression in the sense of wild blurting; you may not let rip. It is life at its most free, if you are fortunate enough to be able to try it, because you select your materials, invent your task, and pace yourself” (11).

The onus is then on the author to create a work that surpasses the mundane in a way that provides a safety net for the reader, while at the same time somehow making the reader trust enough in the author that moral issues are not questioned. Diane Johnson writes, “[. . .] the reader reads, I believe, with the implicit assumption that the writer is an authority, worthy of standing behind the work, who somehow gives the permission to read and enjoy” (318).

Structure

Is it possible to write about an obsessive character without using the first person? Can the third-person omniscient point of view truly capture the workings of the mind? In both *Headlong* and *Lolita* we have the first-person narrator telling us what he did and trying to understand why. Mark Spragg and Seamus Deane both wrote in first person. With first-person narrative, it is at times difficult for the narrator to see the larger picture of how certain events fit into the whole, but again, this might be the best way to effectively show the how and why of an obsessive mind. The use of first person also limits what we know about what the other characters are thinking. Martin's wife Kate has only the use of her dialogue – and Martin's response to that – to get her views across to us. The same is true with *Lolita*. We can easily accept that she is not happy with the relationship with Humbert but we are left to guess as to how it has harmed her psyche.

In addition to not providing an in-depth look at the other character's thoughts, I wondered how reliable a first-person narrator is? In the poem "Gnossiennes" Dionisio Martínez writes:

At this point everything was true./Or to put it more accurately:
everything/was possible./Truth would come later./Truth had never been
an essential element/in his life. All accounts/of the past were made up
possibilities./Truth was always a possibility (53).

The last line is an interesting admission from a poet because to me, truth is one of the major ideals I look for from poets. I think of literature as a way to search for truths – in myself and in humanity – but if I can't believe the author, how can I believe the poem? Which brings me back to first-person narrators; can we believe Martin and Humbert? Are they reliable narrators? Both claim in the early parts of their respective

novels that they are going to tell the story as it “really” happened, but we only see it through their reality, their skewed vision. Therefore, truth was only a possibility.

When I first began writing my novel I did use first-person narrative, even though I knew I wanted to have the novel rotate points of view between the three characters. I was impressed with how Richard Russo uses shifting narrators in *Empire Falls* and I wanted to try something similar. I realized that even though I felt more comfortable writing in the first person, it wouldn't serve the characters – or the story – as well as third person. I was also worried about being able to create three voices distinct enough to last the length of a novel. I'm not sure if it could be considered a compromise, but I ended up using third-person limited for my novel. Each of the chapters is seen through the lens of one character, but we see the world at a slightly larger angle than if I had used first person.

Once I had decided to use three narrators I still faced a choice as to how I structured the novel. Although I ended up rotating chapters between the three characters, my first inclination was to divide the novel into three sections, with each character narrating a large section and then allowing the next character to take over. After writing a couple of chapters in this way I realized that it wouldn't work for what I was trying to accomplish. I wanted the reader to see these characters evolve from their point of view throughout the book, and I couldn't see this happening if, for example, we lost Todd's point of view after the first ninety pages. So much of writing this book was a decision not only of plot and characterization, but the structure in which I would tell the story. So often during the time I spent on this book I struggled with the direction the book was taking. If the writing and ideas had merit, I thought, wouldn't it come easier than this? I believe a mistake that many beginning writers make is thinking that successful authors reached their brilliance easily. Rationally I knew that wasn't the case, but it's nice to get confirmation from those who have reached where I want to get.

When talking about fellow authors, Anne Lamott wrote, “Everyone I knows flails around, kvetching and growing despondent, on the way to finding a plot and structure that work” (85). It’s not easy to write a novel, especially when unsure of the best method to tell the story. Although I had ideas pertaining to the book percolating in my brain for a year or more, it wasn’t until I stumbled upon the proper structure that the writing was able to (somewhat) effectively flow.

How Far to Go

One idea I am trying to come to terms with in my own writing is how I carry the theme of obsession throughout the length of a novel. Do I continually ratchet up the stakes? Will the reader lose interest if there isn’t a constant rise in both deed and disease? Frayn knew what he was doing when he titled his novel *Headlong*. It’s as if the characters need to tumble head over heels, faster as they go, in order to reach a conclusion. This is what the reader expects and this is what the author better deliver. One of my struggles is how far I take my characters down a ruinous road. Todd eventually reaches a point where, due to internal and external pressures, he can’t stop being The Avenger even though he understands that he is out of his league and spinning toward a trap he can’t escape. Karen has tied her own identity so much to her job that she is willing to compromise her integrity to uncover the secret of The Avenger. But even at this point, I still ask myself if I have taken my characters far enough.

A key that allows a person to foster an obsession – at least one that turns ruinous, as in the cases of Humbert and Martin – is the ability to self-deceive. Humbert had convinced himself that his relationship with Lolita, while not acceptable enough to flaunt, was at least worthy of his time and ultimately his freedom. Martin’s self

deception takes a different tack than Humbert's. Critic Michiko Kakutani writes, "Michael Frayn's characters, in both his novels and his plays, suffer from a form of psychological myopia, a blindered self-absorption, that leads them to impose their obsessions upon the world" (1). Martin believes numerous things about himself: that only he in the last 500 years was smart enough to figure out Bruegel; that he could outfox the neighbor who currently owned the painting; that the end justified the means in regard to the lying and distrust he shows his wife. Frayn has some fun with Martin's surname of Clay, indicating the ability to mold his beliefs into whatever will allow him to move forward with his scheme. The way that both Martin and Humbert deceived themselves allowed their respective obsessions to grow to such a degree that the only possible result was failure.

My characters also practice self-deception. Todd believes that his actions as The Avenger are not accountable to the law. He believes that The Avenger is a necessary part of the city, and that Karen's career would suffer without him. Matt believes that the life he has imagined for himself in his head should at times be his reality. If in his mind Karen is the perfect woman, then in real life she should be as well. And Karen believes in her career so much that she can justify any actions that she sees as helpful.

What is it about obsessive characters in literature that does not allow them to succeed? Is it ego? Does the author need to continue making the character less and less stable, or at least less able to control themselves, and therefore their fate? I believe the writer owes it to both the reader and the created novel to take it as far as possible. As David Long wrote, " 'Strangeness' comes to those writers who crank the material one more crank. Think of the word *passage*, its double meaning. Tell yourself you won't be a writer who disembarks too soon" (86). My fear is that I as a writer will

“disembark too soon.” In the past I feel my work has suffered because I did not go far enough, get strange enough. I did not allow my characters (or maybe a better way of putting it is I didn’t trust my characters enough) to fulfill the possibilities I had initiated. One of the flaws of a previous novel I wrote, involving a newspaper cartoonist who listened to his characters a little too much, was that I did not take the cartoonist’s obsession far enough. I consciously have to force myself to let the characters take the bait and run further than what is my natural inclination. Maybe it’s a case of not being confident in my own abilities, or perhaps it’s an issue of effort. David Long believes it wasn’t the initial inspiration that created the strangeness, but rather it was the second, third, fourth, fifth drafts that produced the genius: “It’s necessary to remember that most works progress *toward* strangeness during revision” (92). This, at least, gives me hope.

One of the issues I have with my writing is that I tend to fall in love with the first portions of a novel I write. For instance, in *Boiling the Ocean*, before I sat down to seriously begin writing, I wrote about fifty pages of thoughts and ideas and brief sketches. This is how I was learning about my characters before I thrust them into action and I couldn’t imagine the novel without these sections. This writing was why I had become interested in the idea to begin with. Even after the first draft – when my ear was telling me they didn’t belong and the few people who read the book pointed them out as needing to be cut – I still had a hard time deleting those words. I believe out of those fifty-odd pages, I have kept only a few paragraphs. As Lamott writes, “Knowledge of your characters also emerges the same way a Polaroid develops: it takes time for you to know them” (44). You can have a great idea, but if you really learn who your characters are, and why they do what they do, chances are the finished novel will not have reached the destination you initially thought. I think it’s safe to say that with a large percentage of novels the published version is, if not substantially different, then at

least moderately changed from the author's initial concept of the book. I had to learn – and I'm still learning with this book – that I have to follow where the characters and story takes me. The lesson for me is to do what's best for the book, no matter how much you love the words already on the page, which is why revisions are so important.

One of the questions I believe an author has to answer when creating an obsessive character is what is the character willing to give up to satisfy his or her obsession? If the character loses something unknowingly or by chance, then the effect of the trait – and perhaps by extension the novel – is lessened. By knowing what is at stake and then continuing forward, the character captures our attention even if they can't quite capture our sympathy. Motivation would then seem to be a key ingredient when discussing obsession. As Davies asks, "Where do the springs of behavior lie?" (192). This is another area that I need to improve upon in my writing. I usually can understand where my characters are leading me but I don't always build the rationalization into the plot that will allow the reader to buy into the action. In my novel, a fear I have is that I have not provided the reader with enough reasoning as to why Todd becomes The Avenger. I think it is so important when creating an obsessive character that the author has the proper motivations in place so the reader doesn't question what that character does. Everything would be "in character" so to speak.

All of the books I have discussed have characters who understand what is at stake. Humbert knows he will go to jail if he is caught in the act with Lolita, or even if she tells what has happened. He warns her many times to keep the affair quiet, explaining that if he goes to jail she will be sent to foster homes. He understands that he has no self-control, so he depends on Lolita to save him. Martin is apparently willing to throw away his marriage in the high-stakes con game he is trying to bring to fruition. Atwood shows us how lonely and empty a life can become through the consequences

of secrets and obsession. So again, what do we look for from an author, especially one who writes about obsessiveness? As Diane Johnson writes:

What we want is more a sense of observantness and ambivalence, a person of two minds about the impulses of the human heart, questioning of the criteria of conventional morality. [. . .] We want the sense that the writer has grasped things in all their complexity and has found for them a design whose formal properties and very words release and stir us (322).

Nabokov could not have truly believed that Humbert was a worthwhile human being but he presented him in a way that allowed the reader to judge him on his own words. We need to trust that the author understands the obsessions he or she writes about enough to convincingly be able to portray the character, without writing a morality play. As Davies writes, “Virtually all novelists, playwrights, and poets of serious artistic purpose become inevitably involved in problems of morality, but such writers are on dangerous and artistically ruinous ground when they allow their work to be dominated by moral purpose” (188).

Gardner touches on a similar idea when he writes, “ [. . .] morality is infinitely complex, too complex to be reduced to any code, which is why it is suitable matter for fiction, which deals in understanding, not knowledge.” By saying that morality is complex, Gardner hints that there is not always an easy answer to what is “right.” Is understanding the complexity of morality what allows Martin to convince himself that he is doing the right thing? Martin understood this dichotomy, as he tells us midway through *Headlong* that “Everything we do has bad as well as good in it, dark as well as light” (159). This thought echoes Davies, who wrote, “They [authors] are well aware of the sunlight, but they are driven also to examine the shadow that it inevitably creates” (195). Which leads me to wonder – does obsession have to be a bad

thing? Usually when it's referred to, obsession is thought of in a negative context. Are we to believe that anything taken too far is bad? As I said earlier, authors have to be obsessed to write but that is not necessarily considered bad. I think in fiction, obsession *usually* has its roots in something positive but the obsessiveness of the character can eat away at whatever good was at the core. And the writer, as Davies wrote, "[. . .] is an observer and recorder; he may not permit himself to be a judge" (193). In other words, let the reader make his own judgment.

Conclusion

So after all of the decisions have been made on genre, plot, and structure, what does the author ultimately hope to create? Donna Tartt once said in an interview with Liz Seymour, "Why can't you have really well-crafted prose in an adventure story? What are novels for if not entertainment" (44). It seems that today if a novel is described as a page-turner then it's looked down upon. I agree with her in the sense that there is nothing wrong about a reader being swept away by the novel's action. I think everyone wins if I can write a novel where I discuss my thoughts on obsession while at the same time the reader can't wait to discover what happens next. I think literature has changed over the years in this regard. In the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens was a literary hero. He went on book tours, performed theatrical readings of his work in front of an audience of thousands, and was what we now consider a celebrity. His books were written for weekly or monthly magazines that built an audience expecting cliffhanging action as well as a thoughtful discussion of ideas. These days it seems the normal attitude for literary fiction is that of Jonathon Franzen, who came across as offended that so many people bought his novel, *The Corrections*, because he didn't want to be comprehended by the common reader. At the same time,

critics scoff at the Stephen Kings of the world for writing what readers enjoy. The few literary novels that do become bestsellers, such as Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, seem to do so as much because of marketing buzz as literary merit. It's as if there has to be one "serious" book every year that people must buy. I don't aspire to write genre fiction, but I admire writers such as John LeCarre, who can discuss big ideas in the conventions of a spy story. Done right, I don't see why novels can't be both entertaining and thought-provoking. I'm not sure if my writing style is capable of pulling off that combination, but that is the goal I aim for.

Going back to Gardner's statement about knowledge versus understanding: I think this is an essential purpose of fiction. If the characters understand how to control their obsessions rather than the obsessions controlling them, then they will know how to act, there will be no conflict and therefore no reason to write the novel. Humbert knew he had an attraction to young girls that society did not approve of legally or morally but he could not understand how to act to prevent himself from following his baser instincts. Martin knew what he wanted to accomplish by bringing the Bruegel painting to the world but he did not understand his inability to control either his emotions or the situation. In my book, Todd knew that he was involving himself in situations that were beyond his ability, yet he couldn't let go of *The Avenger*.

It's my job as an author to take the story inside of me and give it life. If I can't believe in the magic of the story then the reader never will. Jane Smiley writes, "Authors live in a dialogue with their work, and their work is their inner life made concrete. Were they not susceptible to the reality of art, they wouldn't have become authors in the first place" (135). Reading about how a character's obsession will ultimately bring about some level of catastrophe can provide much pleasure. Obsession in literature can be humorous and ruminative. It can tell us things about humanity that we don't necessarily want to hear and, when done well, it allows us to understand

ourselves better than we did before. As Dillard writes, “Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mysteries probed?” (72). As someone studying to be a writer, one of the lessons I need to learn is how to let go and trust both myself and my characters enough to properly probe those mysteries.

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Boiling the Ocean: A Novel

by

David Mihalyov

1

“Oh, sweet Jesus. \$266,000,000.”

Todd leaned closer to the screen to read the number again and then pushed his chair away from the computer terminal. He did not normally offer much commentary over his cubicle wall but this bait had hooked one co-worker.

“\$266 million for what?” George asked in his nasally voice, prairie-dogging from the next cube over.

“That’s how much profit Susan Loserio made from selling company stock.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“It’s on the Internet. There’s a site that lists all of the SEC filings for insider trading. I guess women can be as greedy as men.”

Todd looked at the screen again. \$266 million. Now why would our chairwoman and CEO be selling that much company stock? he wondered. She would likely use the old excuse of diversifying her portfolio. Todd checked the filing date and saw that it occurred more than three months ago. He called up a chart of the stock’s history and saw that the current share price was \$2 more than what Loserio had sold at. And the earnings report that came out after she’d sold beat expectations. Maybe the sale

was harmless and she *was* only diversifying, or maybe she needed the cash to buy a new vacation home in the Caribbean. No matter what the reason, \$266 million was a boatload of money. He shook his head and went back to the spreadsheet he had been working on. Todd worked as a financial analyst on the revenue side of the business, which provided him the opportunity to manipulate large amounts of money, so he kept thinking of the stock sale with the feeling that it meant something.

“Hey,” George said as he came into Todd’s cube. He sat down in the guest chair that each of them had. “What do you think of the Newark rumor?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” Todd said.

It had been nearly a year since Todd’s company had been acquired by Susan Loserio’s conglomerate and the latest office gossip was that all of the financial responsibilities for the company were being moved to offices in New Jersey. When the deal had gone through, the arrangement was that corporate headquarters would be located in Genesee, but the financial team would not be the first department to be moved. Whether or not any of the employees here would be asked to relocate or if they would be let go was unclear. Neither option was particularly attractive to Todd. The sad part was that even though it was still a rumor, chances were that if he walked past ten people, one of them would be surfing a job posting Web site. Gallows humor had started to become a daily occurrence and with a large system integration around the corner, low morale was not going to help bring people in for the overtime that would be necessary. Job concerns aside, he still couldn’t get the \$266 million stock sale out of his mind. What could a person possibly do with that amount of money? And Todd was sure that the stock proceeds were just a fraction of what Loserio was worth. It was obscene what top executives were paid; it would take Todd ten years to make what Loserio’s bonus was last year. As with the majority of those sitting around him, Todd wondered if there was life outside of this company. Every day both the morale and

corporate culture seemed to decline and the employees mattered less to those who held power. As he was well aware from working the spreadsheets, revenue numbers that kept declining quarter after quarter could only be countered by reducing expenses. The naïve among his co-workers thought that corresponded to cutting travel and training and the like, but Todd understood that the biggest expense the company had was its employees. He wasn't immune to wondering if the grass was greener somewhere else but with the economy sucking wind and the fact that he had just reached five years with the company, which meant an extra week of vacation, the idea of starting over was not all that attractive.

He sighed and looked out the window that he was fortunate to have next to his cube. The red brick of the old church that stubbornly sat among all of the high-rise corporate buildings wavered in the morning sun. His view included the fire escape; albeit attached to the church, it was an incongruous part of the architecture. A scalloped edge adorned the top of the building and he could barely see a turret rise from out of the corner of his view. His favorite part of the church was the stained glass saint that he thought looked down right at him. The glass window was well over a hundred years old and the colors must have faded over that time but Todd still loved to look at the simple figure dressed in purple and considered that saint to be his, although he had yet to ask anyone from the church which saint was represented. Todd always felt better after contemplating the church. He was not what anyone would consider religious, but the idea that this piece of support for humanity could survive amidst the cut-throat business cultures that surrounded it was comforting, although Todd understood that this was not the sort of comfort the building was intended to provide.

Todd heard a noise behind him and remembered that George still sat in the extra chair. He wondered how long he had been staring out through the window.

"I tell ya," George said as he took a sip from a giant mug filled with coffee. "If

the job market was any better I would be out of here in a second.”

Here we go again, Todd thought. “What’s the problem today?” he asked.

“Same as every day,” George said. “They don’t give a crap about the employees here. The only time they tell us anything is when they have more bad news.”

Todd watched as George worked himself up into the beginnings of a tirade. George’s physical appearance was not threatening, he was short and angular, and seemingly all shoulders, elbows and knees. Whatever body fat he had once possessed was long ago dissipated through nervous energy. Among the other workers in the group, George had been voted most likely to come to work with a gun, and this same routine took place at least two or three times per week. George would become agitated for a few minutes and you would think something was really wrong, but then out of nowhere he would calm down and be back to whatever normal he was. It was just his way of processing the stress that everyone was feeling; short little staccato bursts of venom that needed an escape.

“I should just walk out of here. Screw ‘em over right before the integration comes,” George said. “What’s this?” He picked up and opened a bag of cashews that Todd had brought to work today. “Mind if I take some?”

“You already did,” Todd said. It was time to trot out the lines that he felt had been scripted for him. “Listen, if you’re so unhappy, why don’t you leave? You have your MBA from the best business school in town.”

“Yeah, me and a thousand others. Not to mention the wife and baby I support. Have the markets opened yet?”

“Go look it up on your own computer,” Todd said. But he hid the spreadsheet he had yet to work on and opened the bookmarked page that showed the stocks he followed. “Damn.”

“What,” George said, trying to look over Todd’s shoulder, “what’s going on?”

“The market just opened a few minutes ago and we’re already down ten percent.” He checked the ‘details’ page for the company. “Huge volume, too. Something must be going on.”

“It figures,” George said. “I just moved more money from my 401(k) into the stock yesterday.”

“What did you do that for?”

George shrugged his shoulders in embarrassment. “I thought we were a good buy at the price.”

Todd didn’t say anything else. That was typical George, though. Bitch about the company and then give them more money. Although he didn’t think this was the best time to invest in the company, everyone in the group – him included – had a higher percentage of their retirement fund invested in the company than was smart. But no matter how much you complained about your job you had to hold a certain level of faith in your employer. You had to believe at least a little in who you worked for. Thoughts of faith and belief coerced Todd to look again outside his window toward the church. His saint, as always, held his head low and Todd couldn’t help but think it a commentary on what was taking place next door.

“Got any big plans for the weekend?” George asked.

“I told my brother I would help him with a few things at his house. Home repairs is one of the reasons I still rent.” Todd went back to working on his spreadsheet. “You know, George, if you actually did some work our stock price might go up a little.”

The expressway was crowded for a Saturday as Todd wound his way through

the traffic. The salt that had been dumped on the road during the winter months reflected like a river of white gold, although it made the lower halves of vehicles the same anonymous gray. The car radio played classic hits that were popular when he and his brother Matt were in high school.

“Nothing like having the radio make you feel old,” Todd said.

“How can they call this song old?” Matt said. “This is new Springsteen.”

“Matt, the song is still over 15 years old.”

“I don’t want to think I’m that old. I was in high school when this came out. Do you know what time it is?”

Todd pointed to the clock on the dashboard. “A little after five,” he said.

“I hope Karen hasn’t been waiting too long.”

Not nearly as long as you’ve been waiting for her, Todd thought. “She’ll be fine,” he said. “And anyway, we wouldn’t be late if you had bought the right size pipe to begin with.”

They had spent a good portion of the day replacing a leaking pipe in Matt’s basement. Unfortunately, what Todd thought would be a quick job involved three trips to the hardware store to get the correct materials. It didn’t help that neither of them knew the first thing about plumbing. Todd looked up at one of the light poles, the arms of which hung over the expressway. A few birds – sparrows, perhaps – perched on the horizontal arm. He noticed the birds during his drive to work in the mornings. Every day they sat on the poles and watched the traffic crawl past. Todd believed that the birds laughed at the cars. How advanced could humans be, he imagined the birds thinking, if they spend such a large chunk of their waking hours trapped in metal boxes, breathing noxious fumes, going someplace that didn’t make them happy. He wouldn’t have doubted it if the birds set up times – ‘let’s meet at 7 a.m. tomorrow, they’ll be clogging up around then’ – and that would be their entertainment for the day.

He inched closer to the car in front of them and out of the corner of his eye saw a look on Matt's face that told Todd two things: that he normally was not a tailgater and that their exit was fast approaching.

Todd looked in his rearview mirror and yelled, "Jerk."

"What's up," Matt asked as he grabbed the 'Oh Shit' bar above his window.

"Some guy who was behind me cut someone off when he moved over a lane and now he wants to get off up at this exit. All to pass me and gain one spot in line."

They reached the point where Todd should have been slowing down. The car in the next lane was ahead of them by a nose and had put on its turn signal but Todd didn't ease off the gas. Just as it was almost too late to make the exit, Todd swerved off the expressway and hit the brakes so hard he considered it a miracle that they didn't skid off the ramp. A week ago the expressway was solid ice and Todd could not have pulled this maneuver. The driver of the car in question blared the horn but had no choice but to keep going and pass the exit. Todd looked over to Matt, whose knuckles were white as he pried his fingers from the bar, one by one. Todd breathed heavily but smiled as he tried to get his heart rate under control.

"You could have let him get off," Matt said.

"You're right, I could have," Todd agreed. "But people like that depend on people like us to back off. It won't kill him to get off at the next exit."

Todd pulled the car into the apartment complex where he lived and backed into a parking spot. Karen sat on the upper of the two steps that led to the security door. She stood, blew on her fingers and took off the wool cap she wore. She used to have long black hair that she'd chopped off right before the holidays. Then she decided she didn't like it short and was now in the process of letting it grow out, so it was in that awkward stage where it was long enough to get in the way but didn't look good when she pulled it back, as it was now. Todd knew that Matt didn't care; Karen was Karen to

him, regardless of her hair.

“Todd, Matt,” she greeted them in turn. It always took her two syllables to say Matt’s name – May-utt –, which Matt found endearing, and Todd cloying.

The three of them were going out to dinner and Todd announced that he wanted to take a quick shower before they left for the restaurant. The hot water poured over his head as he closed his eyes and welcomed the heat. He was in decent shape, he thought; he did try to go to the gym at least three times a week. Still, when you’re fixing or building something in a cramped space you use muscles you normally don’t use and Todd felt a little stiff. He also felt a tingle over most of his exposed skin. An anticipatory, alive sort of tingle. Not the same sort of heightened adrenalized rush he felt while working out, but more of an awakening. But what was he waking to? Doing home repairs? Todd didn’t think so. Then he remembered the drive home and his body shivered. Could it be that forcing an overly aggressive driver to miss his exit provided that much of a thrill? Pretty lame, he thought. He shut the water off and began to towel himself dry, still thinking about the drive from Matt’s. Why should he feel bad about what he’d done? Everyone fantasizes at one time or another about taking revenge on bad drivers, so he had simply done what others dreamed about. He dressed in a T-shirt and jeans and rejoined Matt and Karen.

“Are these boxes still from when you moved in?” Karen asked.

“Yeah,” Todd answered.

He rarely noticed the state of where he lived. It was a bland, box-shaped one-bedroom apartment in a complex where everything was identical. The rugs were all the same muted tan and the walls all painted the same off-white. He told people that the reason the boxes had never been unpacked was that he felt as if this was a temporary residence; although he had now been living here for more than three years. Why unpack something if you would just have to repack soon? He more or less felt that his

apartment was a place to sleep, not his home. He put on his jacket and motioned Matt and Karen to the door. The three of them piled into Todd's car and he began the drive to the restaurant.

"You're not going to force anyone into a ditch, are you?" Karen asked.

"I take it Matt told you about our trip." Todd looked at his brother's reflection in the rear view mirror. Of course he would have, Todd thought. Matt tells Karen everything. He probably tells her what kind of bowel movements he has in the morning. Matt had been mooning over Karen for as long as Todd had known her, which was not long after she started working for the same newspaper Matt worked at, which was probably at least four years ago. That's a long time to hold an unrequited love. Todd glanced at Karen, who sat in the passenger seat beside him. By looking at her you wouldn't think she would be the reporter covering the police beat. Todd had to admit he didn't know what that particular type of reporter should look like but Karen wasn't what he would draw up. She was only two or three inches over five feet tall, she sported glasses with oval lenses that barely covered her eyes and although she wasn't too top-heavy, she walked slightly hunched forward, as if she was always facing a strong wind. Not someone you would spot right away if you were scoping out a bar, but once you stopped and focused on her, as Matt had been doing for years, Karen was an attractive woman. Todd knew that his brother was not the most aggressive person when it came to women, but he wished Matt would just do something about Karen since Todd felt attracted to her as well. Since Matt had always 'claimed' her, Todd understood that if he asked Karen out it would be seen as an act of betrayal. Although Todd was younger by a year, he was the first to have a girlfriend when they were growing up; actually two or three depending on how you defined girlfriend. He even went to Matt's senior prom while Matt didn't. Todd had long ago accepted that his brother was the better looking of the two, but in his estimation the

problem with his brother – and he knew it could only be considered a problem if you felt there was something wrong – was that he was too careful, too afraid to jump without knowing where he would land.

An empty basket of nachos sat beside a bowl half-filled with melted cheese. What was supposed to pass as Mexican folk music played through speakers strategically hidden throughout the dining room. Todd sat on one side of the booth with Karen on the inside of the opposite bench next to Matt. Todd preferred this seating arrangement because it was easier to talk to someone sitting across from you while he knew Matt was enjoying the closer proximity to Karen.

“This guy was arrested a couple of days ago for making threatening phone calls,” Karen said. “He actually told the police that he didn’t think they could trace him because he had an unlisted number.”

“I can’t believe how stupid people are sometimes,” Todd said. He felt relaxed: working on his fish bowl-sized margarita had something to do with that. He always found it interesting when Karen shared her police beat stories, most of which never made it into the newspaper.

“My favorite recent example,” Karen said, “was this bank robber that the cops caught because the paper he used to write his note on was a credit card receipt that had his name on it.”

“So how long do you want to stay on the police beat?” Matt asked.

Todd watched his brother fidget with his fork now that the appetizer was finished and his beer glass empty. Matt didn’t know what to do with his hands or how to lean back and relax.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It’s kind of like working for the police. Some cops

want to move up from having a beat to becoming a detective. I want to eventually become an investigative reporter.” She took a sip of her drink and settled a little lower into the faux leather upholstery of the booth. “I’m just waiting for my big break to appear and then I’m jumping on it. Speaking of breaks, Todd, why didn’t you give that guy a break and let him off of the expressway?”

“Are we still on that subject? I don’t know, at the time it seemed like the right thing to do. I hate when people act like jerks just to gain one spot, or save five seconds on their trip. It’s not like I put him out too much; the next exit was only a mile away.”

“Maybe his wife was in labor and he was rushing to get home,” Matt said.

“I saw his eyes in the rear view mirror. He wasn’t nervous, he was angry.”

“Well, I saw your eyes, too, and you seemed pretty angry yourself.”

“Sometimes I get so mad at other drivers.” Todd straightened up and then leaned toward Matt. “Remember when that guy rear-ended Mom and then yelled at her because he said she should have turned faster than she was doing?”

Todd watched his brother troll for the memory, knowing he was having trouble calling it up.

“I vaguely remember,” Matt said. “What was I, maybe eight or nine?”

“You were twelve,” Todd said.

“How do you know that?”

“It was a week before I started junior high, which meant I was eleven.”

“I can kind of picture Dad being upset.”

“Do you know why?”

“Because Mom was in the accident, I guess.”

“It was because she never got the guy’s license plate number or insurance information. She never even got out of the car. He came up to us and started yelling at her and pounding on the window. I think she was so scared of him that she just took

off.”

Matt looked into his empty glass. “I don’t remember that,” he admitted.

“You don’t remember shit,” Todd said. “What I remember is that he got away with it.”

“If you two are going to be this entertaining then I’m ordering another margarita,” Karen said. She got the attention of their waitress and asked for a new drink. Todd and Matt both declined; Matt because he didn’t drink much to begin with and Todd because he only allowed himself one drink if he was driving.

He knew that Matt felt embarrassed for not remembering, especially in front of Karen, but there were times Todd grew frustrated with his brother’s tendency to block out everything unpleasant. How he could do that and still work at the paper was beyond Todd. Every day the worst of the world was at your fingertips. But maybe it was a situation where if it hadn’t happened to him, then it was okay to process.

“So today was your chance to get back at that guy from twenty-some years ago?” Matt asked.

Good job, Matt, Todd thought. Don’t let me bully you. His brother was turning the focus of the conversation away from himself and back to Todd.

“Maybe it was.” Todd pondered the concept that was making its way to the front of his brain after twirling in the recesses for quite a few years. “But isn’t it nice sometimes to gain a measure of revenge? Isn’t that something we all dream about?”

“There’s a few editors I would like to enact vengeance on,” Karen said.

“Nothing too painful, necessarily . . .”

“Exactly,” Todd interrupted. He sensed that he was getting more pumped than perhaps the conversation called for, but he didn’t pull back. “Do you ever talk to the cops about how they feel when a crime goes unpunished? Doesn’t it bug the crap out of them when they know somebody did something but they just can’t find the evidence, or

when somebody guilty walks free because of a technicality or faulty procedure?”

“I remember this one case where this guy was on trial for murder,” Karen said. She raised her eyes to look at the brothers without lifting her head, so her eyes looked over her glasses in a way that Todd loved. “It wasn’t long after I started on the beat and I was still a little bit innocent about how the system worked.”

Todd watched Karen get excited about the subject, and he saw Matt itching to find a way to join in, but allowing himself to become emotional about something was not one of Matt’s strengths.

“It was the first murder I covered and I got to know two of the detectives involved,” Karen continued. “This kid from one of the rich suburbs was charged with some degree of manslaughter for hitting a pedestrian with his car while driving drunk. The kid didn’t even stop after hitting the person but was pulled over by a cop a few miles down the road and blew a point-two-one on the Breathalyzer. They eventually discovered it was his car and everything matched regarding dents, tread marks, paint flecks, etc. So it goes to trial and the kid’s family can afford this hotshot lawyer who gets him off in such a way that somehow he only loses his license for six months. The worst part was that when the kid heard the outcome he turned to the detectives and gave them this slimy smile, basically telling them that they couldn’t touch him.”

“I remember that trial,” Matt said. “We gave it good coverage for a week or two.”

Karen’s story was exactly the kind of situation that riled Todd. He looked at his brother to see if there was any other reaction, but he couldn’t find any. Not surprising, but it still bothered Todd that Matt didn’t get as upset by tales of drunk driving as he did. Had he totally blocked everything from his memory? Didn’t he remember that a drunk driver had killed their parents?

The oranges, reds and greens of the restaurant’s Mexican décor flashed at Todd

from different angles. He heard the buzz of the crowd but could not decipher any particular conversation. He felt his body tense like it did before the start of a football game back in high school. It was as if his senses were set to take in a little of everything and no specifics. He took a couple of deep breaths and forced himself to calm down while at the same time he hoped that Karen and Matt didn't notice anything odd about his actions.

"So what did the detectives do?" Todd asked.

"They were so pissed, but there was nothing they could do about it. They harassed the kid now and then. Once he got his license back they had troopers pull him over occasionally for no real reason." She finished her drink and summed up what Todd had been feeling for years. "I think what they felt more than anything was a sense of helplessness."

Todd shut the door and grabbed a beer from the fridge before stretching himself the length of his couch. He needed to think. The conversation with Matt and Karen had furthered his recent awakening. Good people feeling helpless when a guilty person walks away unpunished. There was something wrong with that picture and he knew it happened every day. The rational part of Todd understood that what he did on the expressway was not smart. Obviously he'd cut it too close in his car and he knew an accident could easily have occurred. But what if he was careful and still able to enact some sort of vengeance on those who cause grief? Who hadn't dreamed about rear-ending a bad driver or cutting the wire of someone that you knew has been stealing cable television? Well, maybe not everyone dreamed of the latter, but Todd could come up with fifty examples if he needed to. His parents, for one. Killed by a drunk driver who ended up spending six months in jail and losing his license for two years. That

sort of punishment put a very small price on human life. So what stopped people, he wondered? Was it a sense of lawfulness, of not wanting to get into trouble themselves? But what about the Bible, wasn't there something written about an eye for an eye? Didn't that prove that revenge is approved of, even expected by God?

Todd had long held the belief that a criminal must be relatively stupid to get caught. Even murder could be gotten away with if you planned every detail. So why not commit a crime against the criminal? Well, crime may be too strong a term, but something to avenge the victim. Something to let criminals know that even though the police had not caught them, someone out there knew their secret. He thought back to his junior-high school years of reading comic books. He loved those tales of secret identities and incognito deeds. He rarely fantasized about super-human powers – he had known that being bitten by a radioactive spider was not going to happen – no, what he had found fascinating was the moral edge that many of his favorite characters teetered along as they fought villains. Knowing that they were not that many steps above those they brought to justice. Wondering if they were helping the world or contributing to its malaise. He didn't know the phrase for it at the time, but he even then he wondered what the difference was between hero and vigilante.

Todd finished his beer and went to find another as he considered whether he should talk to Matt about these thoughts. When the two were growing up they shared their love of comics, even to the point of creating their own super teams that were born from the imagination of two bored kids. They called their team the Cavaliers, who were comprised of five heroes, complete with names, costumes, descriptions of super powers and the genesis of how they became what they were. Matt likely still had the drawings and stories they had created since Todd knew his brother had never outgrown comics, so Todd asked himself: would Matt want to be involved if Todd actually did something? Matt would conceivably want a name and be the sidekick. Robin to Todd's

Batman. The Falcon to Todd's Captain America. Speaking of names, if he followed through with this he would need some moniker to catch the public's attention.

Todd decided that he needed more inspiration than beer could provide and went into the kitchen to find the bottle of whiskey he knew he had stored somewhere. The old saying, 'beer then liquor, never sicker' popped into his brain but he ignored it. He wasn't a big whiskey drinker – it normally took him more than a year to go through a liter bottle – but every once in a while he hankered for the taste. He filled a short glass with ice and poured some whiskey over the top. Now he was ready to think. He scribbled a few ideas down one of those subscription cards that were always falling out of magazines. One big question jumped out at him; namely, how would he locate these so-called criminals? He had no magical ability to sense when a crime was about to be committed, and he sure didn't know where to begin looking. It wasn't as if he hung around the type of people who robbed and murdered, and those sorts of crimes were probably out of his league anyway, at least at this point. How could he do what the police couldn't? Todd took a large swallow of whiskey and tried to rationally think about what he was considering. Could he actually track down criminals and exact a type of vengeance against them? How would he be able to get away with it? Even if he somehow stumbled upon a murderer, Todd understood that he couldn't kill anyone. That wasn't the role he pictured slowly coalescing in his mind. He poured another shot of whiskey and lay back on the couch. Either the room was starting to spin or else he was moving. He held onto the edge of the sofa and decided it must be the room. He closed his eyes and felt himself sway in a rhythmic motion. Concentrate, he told himself. He picked up the paper and tried again to think of a name. The other details of this new life could wait; he couldn't do anything else until he had an identity. What he called himself would have a direct impact on the type of activities he would undertake.

Todd opened his eyes and saw daylight, which confused him until he remembered the night before. He looked at the clock on the VCR and saw that it was nearly dinnertime. An entire day had been wasted and he knew sleep would be an issue heading into the workweek. All because of alcohol and a stupid idea he had spent far too much time thinking about. He sat up and decided the first thing he had to do was rehydrate followed by brushing his teeth to get rid of the pasty feeling. He chastised himself for getting carried away with an idea that would have better served his brother.

He put on a pot of coffee and walked to the building's entrance to grab the paper. He drank two cups as he made his way through the various sections and, after he finished reading, began to straighten the pile so he could add it to the recycle bin. The Local section happened to be on top and it was the one section he rarely read. A news brief caught his eye about a car accident killing four people. A husband, wife and infant son died after being hit by another car, whose driver was also killed. Witnesses said that the man had been driving erratically, swerving across lanes and speeding. It was a sad story and Todd almost tossed the paper aside until he read the name of the driver who caused the accident. It was the same name as the man whose drunk driving killed his parents. The age provided for the deceased was 47 and Todd went into his bedroom and opened the top drawer of his dresser. He pulled out a faded newspaper clipping and re-read the article he had saved for twenty years. The name was the same and the age given was 27. It had to be the same guy who killed his parents. He ran to the telephone and called Matt, but only got the answering machine and Todd hung up without leaving a message. He sat down to ease the nauseating sensation he experienced and thought about what to do. He knew the man hadn't spent much time in jail after killing his parents, as the laws were more lenient about DWIs in those days, but he had never kept track of the man's whereabouts. The guy had paid the stiffest

price this time but he had first killed three more innocent people.

Todd forced himself to think of a different subject and tried to come up with something that he would be able to stomach for dinner, preferably as bland as possible. As he made his way to the kitchen he stepped on the piece of paper he'd written on the night before. He started to crumple it but then decided to first look at his drunken ideas. The ink was smudged, but Todd could make out the short list of names he had come up with.

Cavalier

The Vindicator

The Avenger

The Crusader

Now he remembered how excited he had been before he passed out. The Avenger – what a classic name for a super hero. Sure, it had on the great comic series of the same name but that was for a group, not an individual. And what better name to capture what it was he wanted to do. He didn't want to solve crimes; he wanted to avenge them. Not a costumed super hero or a Robin Hood, but still, a man for the people. Having a perpetrator put into jail was not always the punishment many victims wanted. No, a different sort of vengeance was definitely called for under the right circumstances. Something more appropriate to the original crime. He might not be able to avenge his parents or those other three people killed last night, but maybe he could help others. For some reason he couldn't put his finger on, Susan Loserio and her \$266 million popped into his brain. The crossing of their paths suddenly seemed inevitable to Todd. But would it be Todd she encountered, or The Avenger?

2

The wind was harsh. It was always harsh at Lake Ontario during the winter, and even though it was early March, in these parts that still meant cold and snow. Matt knew that the wind chill was well below zero but he needed to be here. He stood, boots abutted against the northern rim of the country. He liked to think of it in those terms, that he could stand on the sand and know that he was on the edge of America. The seagulls – or lakegulls in this case – allowed the wind to take them on a ride: swooping, rising, and hovering, all without batting a wing. How cold they must be, Matt thought. He then remembered the ice fisherman he had seen on the drive here. What made creatures bare themselves to the elements? Maybe it was some sort of primal test with which he was unfamiliar.

Although Ontario was the smallest of the Great Lakes, its size was still immense compared to most other bodies of water. He remembered last summer a boy saying that as big as it was it might as well be an ocean. Matt liked the idea that Ontario was the gatekeeper to and from the Atlantic. He knew that this caused problems among numerous factions who wanted to control the water level of the lake. The idea of humans controlling nature always baffled him. He had read too many stories of the

same towns on the Mississippi getting flooded every twenty years or so to not know that every once in a while a river is going to change where it wanted to go. When he wandered alone like this, Matt would sometimes think that the best present humanity could give to the earth was to leave it.

He looked around and was happy to be the only person within his field of vision. During the summer, the spot where he stood would be crammed with people. Children splashing in the water, although there were plenty of 'No Swimming' signs around, couples walking the pier, water jets and sailboats skimming the surface of the lake, a fisherman or two hoping a trout or two might veer close enough to the shore. The water bestowed enjoyment on so many different levels, but Matt most enjoyed the serenity that the immensity provided. Being on the water scared him a little; standing on the shore was inspirational.

The city was called Genesee, which it took from the nearby river of the same name. Matt and Todd had lived here their entire lives and Matt was confident that he would die here as well. It wasn't as if he enjoyed the weather; the winters could be long, especially for those who didn't ski, but it was more that Matt lacked the sense of wanderlust that had sent others packing. Granted, many of his generation had left for better job opportunities. After all, the economic health of Upstate New York couldn't compare to many other regions of the country. But what it came down to was that he never had the initiative to leave. Matt preferred that most of the excitement in life occur in his head. He had a great need to believe that something good was out there, both for the world and for himself. It was easier to get through the day if he thought that tomorrow would be better than today, that next week could be great. Maybe it was as others kept claiming – a cop-out for not taking chances – but Matt felt confident that

some day it would be his turn.

He had bought a house a few years back, and although it wasn't in the best part of the city, it was what he could afford at the time. He lived in one of those areas on the fringe of the hip sections, a place where if you found yourself walking you would take a nervous look around and wonder when you had left the nice neighborhood. It had taken Matt a long time to pull the trigger on buying a house. There was the age-old argument of why pay someone else rent versus why did he need a house since it would only be for him?

He took a deep breath and felt the cold air fill his lungs. He walked a few feet closer to the water and crouched to better inspect a hunk of driftwood half-buried in the sand and, after picking the wood up, was amazed at how light the piece was, almost as if the life had been sucked out of it. Matt stood and steadied himself against a gust of wind. Maybe it was stability he had been looking for. Not that by any means he thought his life was crazy. The thing about renting, and Matt understood that not everyone thought this way, was that it always felt transient. He thought of Todd's stack of unpacked boxes because his brother knew he would be moving out one day. Matt wanted the sense of permanence that didn't come from working a job with abnormal hours. And it was nice to feel part of a neighborhood.

Most people long to be part of something, he thought. A group, a team, a class, a party. We all want a certain comfort level, acquaintances that at the very least won't ignore us. It was his theory as to why some people chose to become involved in gangs or hate groups, things of that ilk. If for so long you have felt alone and unaccepted and then someone offers you camaraderie, you jump at it. It's all about belonging. And belonging is why Matt believed he was still at the newspaper after nearly ten years. It was filled with others like him; those who functioned better with words than with people. Those whose idea of a perfect day off was to recline on the couch and read a

good book, and who watched CNN and read the online editions of three papers before they went to work so they were aware of what was happening in the world. He knew that it would reach a point soon – if it hadn't already – where whatever job skills he had would not be transferable outside of the newspaper business, and he was okay with that. The idea of being a lifer at the paper didn't scare him; what kept him up at night was the idea that newspapers wouldn't exist in another twenty years and then what would he do? He couldn't fathom the idea of being in his early fifties, still single and having to grapple with a career change.

He jumped back when a small wave lapped over his boots and then thought back to when he and Todd were kids. He knew it was winter then, too, because he remembered not being able to just run outside and escape, although some detail from the edge of his memory thought that Todd might have forgone the boots and jacket and bolted through the door, because he had this vision of Todd huddled in blankets, soaking his feet in warm water later that same evening. He was sure that Todd would have a different memory and his brother would likely be right. It was partly because of being hounded by Todd for remembering things incorrectly for so many years, but Matt usually deferred to his brother's memories rather than his own. Although if he thought about it, what made Todd's view of the past any more valid than his own? Wasn't it true that if ten people watched the same event there would be ten different versions of what had happened? Regardless, he couldn't bring to mind a possible reason why Todd would have run from the house without dressing for the weather. Maybe there wasn't a reason; maybe Todd was just being a stupid kid.

Matt waved as he spotted Karen at a table in the break room. There were eight tables in the room, with a few vending machines that offered soda, snacks and pre-

packaged sandwiches. Not the healthiest of choices but the paper's cafeteria closed at three, so those who worked a later shift had limited options other than bringing your lunch or having something delivered. The dynamics of the room interested Matt because this was realistically the only place in the building where newsroom personnel would have to mingle with other departments. It used to be that the reporters and editors would never talk with advertising people – you wouldn't want the sales rep of a large account trying to influence the content or slant of an article – but those barriers were falling. And with the advent of Advertorial sections – where readers couldn't be sure if the content was advertising or news – the line had blurred even more. Matt bought a banana nut muffin and a can of cola and sat down with Karen, who was reading an entertainment magazine.

“Be with you in a second,” she said. “I’m almost done with this article.”

He watched her read and ate his muffin in silence until she finished. Her lips moved slightly when she read in a way that he found entrancing and Matt had to force himself to not stare at her.

“Have you noticed anything strange about Todd lately?” he asked after she had closed the magazine.

“Nothing weirder than normal,” she answered. “What’s up?”

“I don’t know, he’s acting edgier than usual. I know he started working out again, I wonder if he’s on steroids or something.”

“Todd? He’s too smart for that,” Karen said.

“I would think so too,” Matt said. “But I keep thinking about that road rage episode. I mean, he’s never had a ton of patience, but it could have been dangerous. And that spiel he gave at the restaurant last weekend, it was like he didn’t care who was listening to him. He wanted to give a lecture, not have a conversation.”

“It was probably the margarita talking,” she said. “I wouldn’t worry about

Todd, he can take care of himself.”

Matt knew she was probably right. Todd had always been able to take care of himself. They depended on that because he put himself into situations that required a survivalist’s instinct. A few weeks ago the three of them were at a bar and Todd stared down this guy, who had him by at least six inches and seventy-five pounds, because he had taken Karen’s chair while she was in the bathroom. Matt told him that he would have done the same thing but they both knew he was not capable. Matt lived by the motto: avoid pain, it hurts.

Karen walked over to a trashcan to throw out the remains of her meal. Matt again noticed the habit she had of wearing long sweaters that reached her thighs and again he was disappointed in that fashion decision.

“Hey, Matt. Don’t stare so hard, it looks like it hurts.”

Matt blushed as he turned to see Greg sit down beside him. Greg covered city politics and wasn’t one of Matt’s favorite reporters. He tended to get a little cocky and was one of those journalists who felt he was bigger than the story, or rather, the story only happened because of him. Matt would grudgingly concede that Greg had uncovered some shenanigans at the mayor’s office but Matt thought he was out to get the politicians instead of reporting on them, a charge the reporter would probably not deny. Greg was someone who had always been in the periphery of Matt’s world – since Matt often edited his articles – but after working with Karen on a series of stories discussing the relationship of the police department and city hall, he had been spending more time with Karen. That was a development Matt loathed but couldn’t very well vocalize. What was he supposed to say, ‘Karen, I’ve never told you how much I care for you but I don’t want you seeing anyone else?’ He knew that wouldn’t fly. Greg’s one redeeming factor in Matt’s eyes was that he played outfield on the same softball team as Matt. He had close-cropped curly black hair and a wiry build that hid the

surprising power he could generate with the bat. The aggressiveness he displayed covering his beat also translated to the playing field, and more than once in the past couple of years Greg had gotten into shouting matches with both the umpire and the opposing team. These tantrums always made Matt uncomfortable, since he was generally non-confrontational and played softball more or less to have fun.

“Hey, Karen,” Greg said as she returned to the table.

“You’re here late,” Karen said.

“I’m trying to finish up the preview for the Mayor’s ‘State of the City’ speech piece for Sunday. Listen, you know Art, the new guy in photo? He’s also the drummer for a band that’s playing at Nash’s on Friday. A bunch of us are going if you’re interested.”

“Sure,” she answered. “Count me in.”

“Oh, Matt,” Greg added. “Feel free to join us if you want.”

“Thanks,” Matt said. “But I don’t get off work until at least two.” But you knew that, didn’t you, you bastard, Matt thought. Nash’s was a downtown establishment that many of the younger reporters went to that offered good bar food, a large beer selection, live music on the weekends and a casual atmosphere. It also was a place that Matt rarely went to because of his hours. He looked over at Karen, who thankfully wasn’t paying much attention to Greg. Of course, she wasn’t paying much attention to him, either.

“Well,” Karen said, “as fun as this is, I have to go finish my story.”

“What wacky crimes are our savvy criminals committing these days?” Greg asked, his back turned to Matt.

“As a matter of fact,” she said as she stood up, ready to leave, “there was an interesting occurrence today. Walk back with me and I’ll tell you about it.”

Matt looked at his half-eaten muffin and thought about throwing it out and

joining them but he didn't want it to seem like he was back in junior high, tagging along unwanted.

"Matt," she said, looking back to him, "you'll get a kick out of reading this one. See ya later."

He watched the two of them leave and then picked up the section of the paper that contained the crossword puzzle. If he was frustrated romantically at least he could exercise his brain for a few minutes.

They say being anal is a good thing – at least in regards to work. Matt had heard this on his first day on the job and he believed it to this day. As a copy editor, triple checking names, facts and numbers was a trait that went part and parcel with his job description. Matt knew what most people thought when he spoke about his job; copy editor, could you find a more boring occupation? Admittedly, Matt thought, when he was editing yet another 15-inch opus on the doings of a town board he at times would ask himself if the call of journalism might have been a wrong number. But every once in a while he would chance upon a story that grabbed him by the neck and wouldn't let go. Karen was right about her story – it was the type of thing that Matt loved to come across. This teenage kid allegedly grabbed a woman's purse as she was walking downtown and, as he was running away, a man who had heard the woman scream tackled him. The woman called 911 from a cell phone she fortuitously had in her jacket and a police car arrived shortly. The man shoved the kid toward the cops as they approached and then slipped away into the crowd before the police could talk to him. Nothing too strange – except possibly the man leaving – until the kid realized that his wallet had been stolen, apparently by the man who had stopped him. The purse thief, who at first did not offer the police any struggle, began to get belligerent, yelling at the

arresting officers to catch the man who had left. The most interesting part was that apparently the man told the kid to call him The Avenger.

Matt finished editing the story and wrote the headline. Then he sat back in his chair and daydreamed for a moment. The Avenger, he thought, what a cool concept. He pictured the crates of comic books he still had stored in his attic. Karen had already left for the evening so Matt sent her a message over the computer system asking if she had any more details about this Avenger character that she hadn't put into the article. It was probably just some wacko looking for a little publicity. He looked at the clock on the wall opposite his workstation and called up the next story to edit.

The roads were icy on the drive home and again Matt thought that one advantage of the hours he worked was the lack of rush hour traffic to drive through. He was tired of winter and during this time of year the weather was such a tease. One day it could be 60 degrees and sunny and the next it could dump five inches of snow on you. He parked in his garage and entered the kitchen. The wallpaper with patterns of tulips and daffodils that he had thought so ugly when he bought the house didn't even faze him now. So many of the cosmetic changes he had planned on making remained ideas in his head. He supposed that if he were married much more would get done around the house, but getting married first meant dating someone. He did the calculations in his head and decided it had been almost five years since he had what he would consider a serious girlfriend. He had dated this girl for over two years and he was ready to settle down, thinking that she was the one. Apparently she had other thoughts, telling him that she was too young to get married, that there were things she needed to do first. He still didn't know what she had wanted to do that couldn't have included him. Travel? He would have gone wherever she wanted. Todd had told him

that she likely wasn't ready to spend the rest of her life waking up next to the same person. Of course, Todd couldn't leave it at that; he had to say that he agreed with her. What was happening with Karen was now symptomatic for him: he wanted to get to know someone before he considered dating them – which for him was a sign of commitment – but then by the time he got to know them they had become friends and the opportunity for dating had passed. Karen *was* different in one sense: Matt was so sure she was perfect for him that he was afraid to do anything that might ruin his dream. It had taken him nearly six months to talk to Karen about something other than editing one of her articles. By the time he did work up the nerve he had already convinced himself of her worthiness. He let out a small sigh. If the dream was still a possibility, then that meant reality had yet to creep in to cause ruin.

Matt was tired of thinking these same thoughts every night so he turned the television on and channel surfed. Between infomercials and bad talk shows, nothing caught his attention. He thought of Karen's article again and went upstairs and entered the attic. He had to sift through seven or eight milk cartons filled with comics but then he found what he was looking for. He flipped through the books, which were held in plastic protective covers. He owned nearly one hundred issues of *The Avengers*. Simply looking at the covers made him feel 12 years old again and he closed his eyes to recall the way his childhood bedroom looked. He must have been around nine or ten when his parents had finally allowed him and Todd to have separate rooms. Initially he was thrilled, but it took him a long time to fall asleep those first few nights, unable to hear Todd's gentle breathing as a sign that everything was okay. The medium-blue walls were half-covered with posters of baseball players and drawings of Spider Man and the Hulk. The blanket he had used for at least ten years displayed the logos of professional football teams. He had a bookcase whose contents moved progressively from the Bobbsey Twins to the Hardy Boys to low-grade fantasy. A wooden shelf on

one held a collection of soda cans while one on a different wall showed off model cars he had built. When he thought of that room now it was always a rainy summer afternoon. His first job was as a paperboy, and was carried out with the express purpose of having enough money to buy new comics every month. He kept the hobby up through high school, eventually incorporating Todd's collection when his brother inexplicably found them juvenile.

Matt took one of the books out of the plastic and started to read. The next thing he knew it was five a.m. and he had read all seven issues of that story line. He exited the attic, arching his back to loosen the cramped muscles, and readied himself for bed just as the sun began to peek over the horizon. His last thought before falling asleep was that if he ever became desperate enough to place a personal ad, the way he had spent the past few hours would not be a strong selling point.

3

It wasn't always easy working with a friend. Karen hoped that Matt didn't do it consciously, but she knew he wasn't as harsh editing her stories as he was with others, at least not as harsh as he needed to be. She knew he was afraid of hurting her feelings. The funny thing was, Karen wanted him to hurt her feelings, at least just once, so they both could realize that he was able to treat her like every other reporter. But he didn't and Karen had to be careful around him. Not like Todd. Todd she could tell to fuck off and he would laugh about it. If she said that to Matt he would be devastated. She had to be careful in other ways as well. There was one time she and Matt were sitting around her apartment, drinking a few beers, and she said something about how liberating it was to walk around without wearing a bra. His eyes immediately dropped to her chest, as she knew they would. He couldn't help himself and it pissed her off. The rational part of her knew that virtually every man in the world would have reacted in the same way, but that didn't matter. Matt had had this thing for her for years. He didn't think she knew about it but how could she help not knowing? Not to mention that it was a running joke between her and Todd. At times she felt bad, as if she was holding him back from having a relationship with anyone else. Maybe if she were married he would

give up and move on. She offered a slight shudder when the word 'marriage' popped into her brain. She had come way too close to going down that road when soon after college graduation she had accepted her boyfriend's proposal. She still thought of what he did as romantic. They had taken a ride up Bristol Mountain on the ski lift during an Autumn leaf watching trip and as they walked down, looking at the trees and holding hands, he had suddenly, nervously, bent on one knee and with shaking hands opened the ring box. To this day she couldn't swear to the words he had used, she was too blown away by the moment. Luckily the decision that ruined the relationship but saved her was that they had moved in together first. It quickly became apparent that neither one of them were ready or wanted to be married; it was just what they had thought they were supposed to do.

Karen now had a hard time focusing on the person she was then. It was almost as if she remembered something an old friend had done, not her. Well, she was a different person now so maybe it was somebody else she was remembering. Are we the same person throughout our lives, she wondered, or do we shed our skin multiple times, allowing a sort of rebirth each time? She thought again of Matt. Her belief was that he was waiting. Waiting for her to become so discouraged with the dating scene that she'd settle for him. The sad part was that she believed that he probably wouldn't mind her using the phrase "settle."

Todd was another story. There was one instance a year or so ago when she and Todd came about as close to becoming more than friends as you could get. Needless to say, alcohol was involved. If it had been any other guy, Matt excluded, there would have been no doubt as to the outcome, but something inside Todd's brain wouldn't let him go through with it. He didn't explain but she guessed it was because of Matt. In a way she was glad, because she wouldn't have been able to see Todd the same way again. She didn't think he would have had a problem; he probably would have woken

the next morning and treated her as if it had never happened. Sometimes she wondered if that boy had a conscience or if he could simply compartmentalize everything.

Whatever the issues she had with the brothers, the three of them were tied together in ways she wasn't sure she would ever understand. Maybe she should marry both and sleep in alternate beds, but it scared her to think that Matt would probably be okay with that arrangement. She thought of their relationship as one of those scales you find in the doctor's office; one side was Matt, the other Todd, and Karen was the piece in the middle that moved back and forth to balance the two. But who would balance her, she wondered, and who was moving her?

Karen sat at the kitchen table of her mother's house, sipping a cup of coffee. She tried to visit at least every other week if possible, especially now that her mother was retired. Her dad had died nearly ten years ago; he dropped dead of a heart attack while carrying groceries in from the car. Karen didn't see it happen but her mom had told her the two images that stuck out were of a jar of mayonnaise that broke right beside his head and of an apple that rolled the length of the driveway. Strange what the mind focuses on in times of stress. Her mom had continued to work part-time up until a year ago, and Karen believed it was more to stay occupied than from a monetary need. If she thought about it much Karen would get upset at how unjust the world was. You work for forty-odd years planning and saving for a retirement lifestyle that doesn't come. Her mother's visions of travel to exotic locales didn't take into account traveling alone. The one dream Karen knew that her mother still held was to be a grandmother and that was a gift Karen could not see ever providing. At this moment her career was more important than any thoughts of family. Karen knew that she was too selfish right now and she was comfortable with that. Besides, if her job didn't allow her a fighting

chance for a relationship – what with working nights and weekends with no set schedule – how could she even consider having kids?

She watched her mother add milk to a cup of coffee – the same cups that Karen remembered stealing sips from when she was a kid.

“So, Mom,” she said. “Do you have the garden planned out for spring?” Gardening was always a safe subject to bring up, especially if Karen didn’t want to answer too many questions about her life.

“I’m just going to put in a few tomato plants this year. The flowers are mostly perennials now so there’s not as much work as there used to be.”

Karen couldn’t tell if her mother was pleased or not with that situation. It used to be that during the planting months of May and June her mother would bring home containers of flowers a couple of times a week and her dad would inevitably make a crack about not having any lawn left to mow if she kept expanding the garden. Karen had been interested when she was younger but never had the patience to weed, fertilize, plan for sun or shade, and she especially did not have the patience to wait for the results. Bulbs had always amazed her, though. Planting something that looked like a small onion in the fall and then forgetting about it until the snow melted and you suddenly found something popping through the recently thawed soil. She knew nature was amazing if you thought about it but she rarely took the time. She looked at the wall behind the kitchen table. An open-faced knick-knack cabinet was mounted on the wall; the shelves lined with miniature bells that had been collected from years of vacations, birthdays and Christmases. Karen remembered a few-year stretch where the only gift she gave her mother was a bell. Her dad wasn’t the most creative gift-giver and his attitude was if you found something good, stick with it. The only part of the kitchen that wasn’t at least twenty years old was the floor that had been replaced last year. The faux oak wainscoting had been in place for as long as Karen could remember, as had

the eggplant-and-tomato-themed wallpaper. The fan attached to the three-bulb chandelier had been installed when Karen was young enough to be shocked by her father's cursing while he put it in. There was a certain comfort for her in the familiarity of the room but Karen could never see herself spending thirty-odd years in a kitchen, much less a three bedroom, one bath Cape-style house such as this. A beam of light from the March sun came through the window above the sink and struggled to make its way to where Karen sat but fell short, instead, illuminating the lower half of a spindled table leg. Come June, the strengthened shaft would bisect the width of the table. Her mom sat down across from her and, with a shaking hand, raised a coffee cup to waiting lips. Karen thought it odd that her mom usually studied her – like those nights during high school when Karen would come home from a party and her mom would try to ascertain if any alcohol had been consumed – but today eye contact was barely made.

“What's going on, Mom?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you've been very distracted since I got here. Is anything wrong?”

“You're always the investigator, aren't you?” She rose from her chair and moved to get a plate from the counter. “Do you want some cookies? I baked a batch of oatmeal ones this morning”

“Mom, what is it?” Karen feared an announcement of cancer, or some other fatal disease. Still, she reached across the table to grab a cookie.

“You know how your Aunt Jean always raves about the senior community she lives in?”

“Yeah, I know.” Karen watched her mother break off a piece of a cookie. It was one of those actions Karen thought unique to her mother; most people brought the entire cookie to their mouth to take a bite.

“Well, she wants me to move down to Arizona to where she is.”

Karen's initial thought was to blurt out a proclamation about not moving but she held her tongue. Her second thought was how interesting it was to phrase it that 'your Aunt Jean wants me to move,' rather than 'I'm thinking of moving.' She wondered how often her mother had manipulated words to slough off responsibility for something.

"You're not considering it, are you?" Karen said. Immediately she knew the way she said it sounded confrontational.

"Of course I'm considering it. Why not?" her mother said. She finally looked Karen in the eye. "It's getting harder to take care of things here, harder to get through the winter."

"But this is your home."

"I wasn't born here," her mother said defensively. "You weren't even born here. I've moved before."

Karen didn't know what to think. It was true that she and her mom were not talk-on-the-phone-every-day close, but Karen had always felt a certain comfort knowing her mother was a mere fifteen minutes away if needed. As she looked at her mother, Karen wondered if she was getting a sneak preview of her future. Her mom had aged well. Her brown eyes were still clear and sharp and her graying hair was still thick enough to style, although middle-aged thickening had developed into a retiree's heavy set. Karen knew she had inherited her mother's childbearing hips and she mouthed a silent oath to start eating healthier. Her thoughts came back to Arizona. With her dad long since passed on, her mother's leaving would make Karen feel almost orphaned. Then her mind hit on something.

"This isn't about grandkids, is it?"

"No." Her mother finished her cookie and then rose and walked to the kitchen sink to wash off her hands. "Granted, it would make the decision a lot harder if you

had children, but I would still consider it.”

“Don’t make me feel guilty,” Karen said.

“Honey, this isn’t about you, this is about me. Jean and I were just like best friends when we were growing up. We did everything together, told each other all of our secrets. We shared a room from as early as I can remember all the way through high school. I miss her.”

Karen was always amazed when she was forced to realize that her mother had had a life before getting married and becoming a parent.

“Plus,” her mom said, quieter now. “I get lonely.”

How could Karen argue with that?

She filed her story about the dead body found in an abandoned warehouse in the city. The person had been dead for a few weeks and badly decomposed. No identification and no missing person reports that initially matched. What happened to a person’s life where you could be dead for that long and nobody missed you? How does someone disappear from society that completely? Maybe this was why Karen had been thinking about her life lately; she wondered who would miss her if she died tomorrow. Surely not Glen, the last guy she dated, back around Christmas. He was a nice enough guy; he opened car doors and sent flowers to her apartment, but he let slip early on that he was looking for someone like his mother, someone who would be happy to stay home and raise a family. She had broken that relationship off pretty damn quick.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Karen looked up and saw Alan, her Metro editor. He had grabbed a chair and sat on the other side of her desk and she wondered how long she had been staring off into space.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Do you think they’ll ever figure out who it was?” Alan nodded toward her terminal, indicating the subject of her story.

“Eventually, through dental records or something. Or after the next major holiday, which is the only time some people stay in contact. What’s up?”

Alan didn’t normally pop over just to chat, although Karen wished he would more often. He had been her boss for about six months, ever since he had moved here from a smaller paper in the chain. He was a nice guy, although not quite as aggressive in chasing after local politicians and other public figures as the reporters would have liked. Still, he was fair, and you couldn’t ask for much more than that in an editor. If your story sucked he told you that, and if it was good he told you that as well. Alan was married, had three kids all under the age of six and carried a perpetual look of needing sleep.

“Just wondering what your thoughts were on The Avenger,” he said.

“I don’t know. He could turn out to be someone interesting or he could end up being some sort of vigilante kook. Not that the two have to be mutually exclusive.”

“What was the latest thing he did?”

Karen thought for a minute. There had been a rash of incidents in the past week or two involving this character and, just in case no one would be able to figure out who was involved, he had begun to leave a business card with a ‘Compliments of The Avenger’ message included.

“I think the last one was when he got that guy who had been arrested for stealing cars but was let off on a technicality.”

“Oh, yeah,” Alan said. “That was great – totally wrapping the guy’s car with about 10 rolls of duct tape.”

“And then leaving a note saying he didn’t want anyone to be able to break into

this car,” Karen finished. “Whoever The Avenger is, he has a creative mind.”

“I’m thinking we need to do something on him, some in-depth look at what he’s done, what he’s trying to accomplish, how the public views him – that sort of thing. Maybe a multi-part series.”

“Are you serious?” Karen asked. She tried not to act too excited, though she knew the rise in inflection at the end of her question gave her away. Chances are Alan wouldn’t be mentioning this to her if she wasn’t the reporter they had in mind to write the series. She could already see her byline on 1A for three consecutive days.

“I’m serious,” he said. “I know Channel 12 is planning a special on The Avenger.”

“Oh,” Karen said, turning away her head. “So we’re just playing catch-up with TV?”

“Not exactly. I think they’re going to blow their wad before they’re ready, and then when there is solid information and a real story they’ll have a hard time rationalizing doing something that big again. My thinking is that there isn’t enough out there yet to do the job right, so we start off slow and do a small feature. And then in a few weeks, or a month, or two months – whenever we have something great – we’ll do the big one.”

“And you’re asking me to do this?”

“What do you think? Don’t you want to?”

“Of course I do, I was just making sure.” This was as excited as Karen had been during her journalism career. Seeing her name in the paper for the first time was a thrill, getting her the police beat assignment felt great, but this . . . this was the chance she had been waiting for. This could be her ticket to, to where? She didn’t know where, all she knew was she was going somewhere. All of the confused thoughts about her life disappeared and Karen knew without a doubt that this – the paper, the

reporting, the thrill – was who she was. This was the life she was supposed to lead.

“We think you’re the person for this,” Alan said as he tilted his head toward the glass office at the end of the newsroom where the editor’s office was located. “So start thinking about it,” he said. “When you have a few minutes here and there start doing some research. Get the police point of view, see if this type of thing has happened in other cities.” He stood up and stretched. “Maybe talk to a psychologist or something to find the personality traits necessary for someone to do this. You know the drill.”

“I’ll send you some ideas and maybe an outline by the end of the week,” she said, already thinking of what she needed to do.

He glanced at his watch and began to walk away and then stopped to look at her. “This is a great opportunity, Karen. This could be big.”

“Absolutely,” she said, more to herself than to Alan. She watched him walk down the aisle, stopping to talk to some of the other reporters who were still working. She noticed her message bar flashing. One of the copy editors – not Matt, of course – had a question about her story. She called the article up and tried to focus on the area that needed work but all she could think about was The Avenger.

Karen entered her apartment and listened to the messages on her answering machine. A couple of hang-ups, which she hoped were just telemarketers, and a message from Todd. She checked the time and saw that he had only called twenty minutes ago so she dialed his number.

“Hey, it’s me,” she said after he answered. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing much. Watching a hockey game on TV.”

“Let’s go out for a beer, or a cup of coffee or something.”

“Now? It’s nine o’clock; I have to work in the morning.”

“C’mon, suck it up.” She paced the length of her living room as she talked. She loved cordless phones. “I’m wired and I have to talk to somebody about what happened tonight at work.” She knew that if she smoked she’d be chaining them right now.

“What happened?”

“You’re not getting out of this that easy. I’ll tell you when we go out.”

“All right,” he said. “But not a bar. What about Apollo’s, isn’t that the diner near you?”

“That’ll work. How soon can you be there?”

“Give me twenty minutes.”

Karen tried to kill the next ten minutes by wandering around her apartment. She adored this place, a loft in the artsy part of the city that was within walking distance of galleries, bars, coffee shops and the only independent movie theatre in the city. She didn’t own it, but that was fine with her. Renting at this point in her life was the smart thing. She didn’t want to put the time into home ownership and she couldn’t afford to buy a house in this area anyway, which is where she wanted to live. She couldn’t handle living in Matt’s part of the city, one of those places you didn’t know existed unless you lived there, and the only businesses around were a deli and a convenience store. It was also mostly occupied by families, whereas her neighborhood was predominantly single tenants. It kept her feeling young. She didn’t have much of a kitchen – room enough for a fridge, oven, microwave and one counter – but she didn’t do a lot of cooking anyway. Matted and framed posters of past arts festivals adorned her walls. She could keep track of her recent life by the year indicated on the poster. Karen moved a jade plant out of her way and sat in an alcove that overlooked her street. In the summer she would open this window and let the breeze waft over her, listening to the sounds of the world. Her cat, a gray and black, mostly Persian female, jumped

up by Karen's feet and rubbed its head against her leg. Karen absent-mindedly scratched the cat between its ears and both felt and listened to the purr emanate from the animal. She felt guilty, as always, that she didn't spend enough time with the cat, and then realized that twenty minutes had almost passed. She grabbed her purse, took a quick look in the bathroom mirror and contemplated her hair. Every day she expected it to look better than it did. She was caught in a cycle of waiting for it to grow long again but then running out of patience and getting it cut. She knew when the weather began to get warm again she would want it short. She shrugged her shoulders and left the apartment.

Todd was waiting in a booth, taking a sip from a coffee mug, when she arrived. This was one of the few 24-hour diners in the city and the only one Karen felt safe going to. The place was somewhat empty, since the nighttime business didn't pick up until after midnight. The crowd at this time of night was generally comprised of older folks out for a cup of coffee after watching a movie or play. The busy period would come after the younger crowd starting leaving the bars. Karen took off her coat and slid in across from Todd.

"Thanks for coming," she said.

"Not a problem."

The waitress stopped by and Karen – against her better judgement – ordered coffee. She knew if she sat here and talked, one cup would turn into four and then she would never get to sleep tonight.

"Are you gonna eat anything?" she asked.

"Maybe an omelet," he said as he skimmed the menu.

"So," she said. "Is everything all right with you? The job going okay?"

"I thought we were here to talk about what happened to you at work."

"We will. I didn't want the conversation to be all about me."

The waitress brought her coffee and gave Todd a refill. Karen watched him take three sugar packets and then stir the contents into his cup. The T-shirt he wore showed off the fact that his upper body had gotten larger in the past few months. She didn't see Todd every day but she saw him enough that the change in his physique wasn't too noticeable. She thought back to Matt's comment about steroids and again decided against it. What possible reason would Todd have for taking a growth hormone that had possible dangerous side effects? From her vantage point she could see into the kitchen and, after catching a glimpse of the cook, she was happy she chose to stick with only coffee. This was the kind of place where the food tasted good after spending a few hours in a bar but otherwise the trust level of the quality just wasn't there.

Karen thought again of how different the two brothers were. They were another example that looks weren't everything. Not that Todd was unattractive, but looking at it objectively Matt was better looking. Todd had more muscles but Matt was taller and had a more natural build. Matt had thick hair that you knew wasn't going anywhere, where Todd's wispy locks had already begun their retreat. And if you didn't know better, there was no reason to think they were brothers by their appearance. Even their eyes were different colors: ice blue for Matt and deep brown for Todd. What Todd had going for him that in Karen's view made the difference was his personality. He was much more excited by life, more willing to experiment, have fun and act spontaneously – all of which made him more attractive. She was amazed at how ingrained the two had become in her life in just a few short years. She suddenly realized that Todd had been talking to her.

"Excuse me?" she said. She wondered how much of what he had been saying she had missed.

"I said that things are feeling a little shaky at work these days."

"How come?"

“There’s been a lot of rumors about the company laying people off. Earnings are coming out next week and from the numbers I’ve seen lately it could be ugly.”

“So how does that affect you?” Karen asked. She had to admit that she was clueless when it came to how the business world operated. Although she worked for a large chain, employees in the newspaper industry – at least in the newsroom – were fairly insulated from layoffs and stock worries.

“I’m not sure. I guess it depends on how bad the numbers are and how deep they want to cut. I’d like to think I was safe, but . . .” Todd finished the sentence with a shrug.

“You mean you could lose your job? You’ve been there for a while.”

“A little over five years now, but that doesn’t matter. When we got acquired last year any job security went out the window. The Genesee office isn’t the main one anymore and they want their own people in place. That’s their prerogative because they bought us.” The waitress brought Todd his food and he picked up his fork. Instead of using it to eat, he waved it to emphasize his point. “But what would piss me off was if the executives were jerking us around, getting rich, while the company and its employees went into the toilet. Our CEO recently sold a ton of stock and that’s got me wondering.” He moved his food around on his plate and nibbled at the toast. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to rant and that’s not why you wanted to go out. So, what happened at work today?”

Karen shifted on the vinyl-covered seat of the booth – trying not to think about why it felt sticky – and leaned toward Todd. She felt bad for his job situation but he was right; the reason she wanted to talk to him, to talk to almost anybody for that matter, was to tell him about what she now thought of as her career-making opportunity.

“I’m going to discover who The Avenger is,” she announced.

4

“Excuse me?” Todd could not believe what he had just heard.

“I’m going to discover who The Avenger is.”

Well, Todd thought, this conversion had certainly taken an interesting turn. He hoped that the expression on his face did not give away the shock he felt at Karen’s pronouncement. What would happen if he were outed? This wasn’t the first time fears of getting arrested had popped into his head.

“How are you going to do that?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Alan, my editor at work, gave me the assignment of doing an in-depth profile of The Avenger. That in itself is so cool, but I figure the kicker would be if I could discover The Avenger’s identity. Now that could be Pulitzer-worthy.”

As shocked as he felt, Todd couldn’t help but get caught up in Karen’s enthusiasm. She looked like he felt when he had first decided to become The Avenger: the entire world suddenly opened its arms just to embrace you. Of course, he regretted his decision to choose the diner over a bar because he could really use a drink right now. On the other hand, maybe he could have a little fun with this. It’s always better to have an adversary close by. Not that he now considered Karen an enemy, but he

wasn't prepared to end his plans for a little side-career quite yet. He had to be careful with her, though; he knew how aggressive she could be and she obviously thought this was her break. Not that she would ever dream that he was whom she was searching for but she wasn't stupid by any stretch. Matt he wasn't worried about. His brother was probably happy knowing that there was a super hero out there. The Avenger was more fun for Matt if he didn't know who it was.

"Where are you going to start?" he asked.

"I don't know. I haven't had a chance to get past the high I'm on and actually think about the work involved."

The waitress stopped by and re-filled their coffee cups. Like Karen needed more caffeine, Todd thought. He watched a transvestite walk through the door and couldn't help staring as the man walked past. He tried to keep an open mind about people but some things he just could not understand.

"I see that guy everywhere," Karen said. "I think it's so cool that he does what he wants and doesn't try to hide who he is."

Well, some of us choose to hide our alter egos, Todd thought. He couldn't very well walk around the city with a large 'A' on his chest, shouting 'Look at me. Look at me,' could he? No, some things were better left unknown.

"So," he said. "What are you trying to hide?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're obviously impressed with that guy. What secrets does your dark side hold?"

"I don't think I'm trying to hide anything," Karen said.

"I don't believe you. Everybody has something."

"Then what about you, muscle-boy, what's your secret?"

"You're the reporter," Todd said. "That's your job to discover."

It was nice to see Karen like this, without Matt around. They could be much more relaxed – even flirty – when they were alone. He stared at the deep brown eyes that gleamed behind her glasses and couldn't help but think that part of her excitement was due to him. In a way he wished that Matt would get it over with and ask her out so he could take his shot. He knew his brother would never forgive him if he acted first, although he remembered the time with Karen last year that he had to force himself to walk away from. As far as The Avenger went, he hoped he wasn't just talking a good game. The first incident with the kid who stole the purse was one thing – simply being in the right place at the right time – but realistically, how far could he take it? He didn't know where to find any real criminals and he wouldn't know what to do if he found one. Hopefully he – or at least The Avenger – was finding his niche and could be satisfied with that. His emotions had been on a roller coaster ride the past few minutes: shock, cockiness, lack of confidence. He looked around the diner. The booths were starting to fill, and if looks meant anything then half the people in the place were to be suspected of some sort of crime. Maybe all he needed to do was pay attention to what was going on around him.

It's funny what sets you off, Todd thought. You could witness the same event a thousand times over the years and it wouldn't phase you, and then one day that same thing happens and you start to obsess. Todd was starting to obsess.

On the drive home from work a guy in the truck ahead of him tossed a cigarette butt out of the car window. Again, Todd had seen this occur too many times to count, but today it had irritated him, and it got him to thinking. Assume there were about 50,000 smokers in the city and they averaged a pack a day. That meant one million cigarettes a day got smoked. One million, Todd thought, truly mind-boggling. And

where did all of the butts go, he wondered? He conservatively guessed that at least one third of them were flippantly discarded on the ground. That's 333,333 cigarette butts a day cast aside to blow in the wind, collect on the side of the road, pollute the landscape. Multiply that by 365 days and you would have – he tried to do the math in his head – more than 120 million butts a year; a very large amount of litter. Granted, cigarette butts were small, but the total volume had to be huge. The truly irritating part of it all to Todd was when the butt got tossed out of the car window. Why did people think ashtrays were placed in cars? Were they afraid that putting out the cigarette in their car will make it stink? They're smoking freakin' cigarettes, Todd thought, they reeked anyway. And then there were the jerks that used their ashtray but emptied it on the side of the road or in a parking lot. Thanks for the effort, bud. Where, Todd wondered, was the line drawn between protecting personal space at the expense of harming public space?

This was the type of thing that got him upset. He experienced these little snaps in his brain, white flashes that didn't even last a second but educated him that for a brief moment he knew he could lose control and be capable of doing something bad. He wondered if he had lost some of his tolerance since becoming The Avenger because it was now easier for people to piss him off. And it wasn't just thinking someone else was an idiot and then walking away; Todd wanted that person to know just how much of an idiot he or she had been, which brought him back to thinking about the guy driving in front of him. After the first butt flew out the window Todd purposely stayed behind him. He had nothing in mind other than to see what else the guy would do. At one point Todd moved into the left-hand lane and passed the truck, just to see what the guy looked like. The man drove a pick-up with a cab plastered with bumper stickers exclaiming that the government better stay out of his way. Politics was not Todd's arena so he tended to read these strictly for the humor value. The guy looked to be about Todd's age, with stringy brown hair that covered shoulders bared by a dingy

tank top. As Todd stole another glance, a second butt flew out the window, and Todd felt another one of those white snaps, which he knew wasn't good to have while doing 65 on the expressway. Todd moved over two lanes so he could drop a bit behind the guy without being too obvious.

Todd didn't have any place urgent to be so when the pick-up got off at the next exit, Todd did the same. He wasn't prepared to confront the guy – at least not yet – but he wanted to glimpse some more of his life. He followed the truck into a gas station and went into the mini-mart while the guy pumped gas. Todd grabbed a bottle of soda and then wandered the store until he saw the guy replace the gas pump and walk toward the store. Todd moved to the register, paid for the drink and stood off to the side, taking his time putting his change back in his wallet, until the guy paid for his gas and, to Todd's amusement, asked for a pack of smokes. Todd held the door for the guy, letting him out first, and then followed him out of the parking lot, allowing one car to get between them. After about a half-mile, the guy turned into a new housing development. Todd hadn't thought about where the guy would live but this surprised him. Appearances must not count for much because the man apparently lived in one of those huge cookie-cutter homes sprouting up everywhere that made Todd wonder where all the people came from that could afford them? These houses were monsters, but so similar in their excesses and they couldn't be more than twenty feet from each other with no trees to speak of. Why spend that much money to be so close to your neighbors and have no landscaping to act as a separation? And how could this guy afford a house like this, Todd wondered, while he still rented? Todd made sure the guy actually went into the house rather than simply being a visitor, and then turned into a driveway a few houses down before backtracking out of the development. He jotted down the address with no clue yet as to what he would do with the information, but he knew he would do something. Ideas could simmer in his brain for days or weeks until

The Avenger would know what course to take.

Todd was reading through his e-mail at work when George wheeled his chair in front of the opening to Todd's cube. "It appears that today's the day," he said.

"For what?" Todd asked.

"For letting people go. Can't you hear the crying and packing and whispering?"

"Are a lot of people getting fired?" Todd was amazed at how oblivious he could be at times.

"Latest number I heard was 250. I don't know who they think is going to do all of the work," George said. "It's not like we sit around with our thumbs up our butts all day."

"250? That's what, about 8 percent of the employees in town?" Todd punched some numbers in his calculator to find out approximately how much that would save each year in salary and benefits. It would have to be well over ten million annually, even taking into consideration severance packages. That was the joy of one-time write-offs. That was also what happened when companies were more concerned with hitting Wall Street expectations than getting the work done.

"Have you heard any names?" Todd asked.

"Not yet. Maybe we should take the rest of the day off. They can't fire us if we aren't here."

"Are you scared?"

"Of course I'm scared," George said.

"As much as you bitch about the company, I thought you'd be looking forward to this day, taking the severance and enjoying life."

"Hey, that's not fair. Unlike you, I have a wife and baby at home and I need a

certain amount of money coming in. It wouldn't be easy finding another job making what we're making."

"Relax, George, I was joking."

Todd looked at George, looked at the man who had sat next to him for the past two years, and saw a person with a life outside of the office rather than simply the nasally whiner one cube over. Someone with a wife who loved his angular, nervous body, and who had struggles and concerns that Todd couldn't imagine. Someone who was a complex individual rather than a body Todd spoke to for maybe five minutes a day. His brain hurt when he thought about how many of his co-workers would be in tougher positions than he would be. Realistically, all Todd had to worry about was Todd. He didn't have to pay for a son's braces or a daughter's wedding or save for college for any number of children. He could recover and survive better than most if it came to that.

"Would you relocate to New Jersey if they offered?" Todd asked.

"No," George said. "There's too many ties here. How about you?"

"I don't think so. Not that I'm determined to die here, but I don't think this is a company worth moving for."

"Would you give me one more goddamned minute?" Todd and George both turned toward the voice, which came from a couple of rows over.

"Sounds like Laura is packing up," George said.

"Laura? But she does a great job."

"Get it through your head, Todd. It doesn't matter if you do a great job or not, they're laying off entire groups, not bad employees."

"This is going to be an ugly day. If they get rid of me, I hope they do it soon." For a moment Todd was unsure what to do but then he stuck his hand toward George. "Well," he said. "Good luck to both of us."

The morning went by without any word. Todd felt the need to get some fresh air, so even though the temperature was only in the forties he made the three-block walk to buy a slice or two of pizza. He shoved his hands into the front pockets of his slacks and brought his arms close to his body to help ward off the cold. It wasn't necessarily the temperature that got you, he thought, it was the wind; and it was always windy downtown. If it came down to it he wouldn't miss working in the middle of the city, not to mention having to pay \$70 per month to guarantee a parking spot. He entered the pizzeria and ordered two slices of pepperoni and a bottle of iced tea, wondering if it would be the last time he came here. He sat down at an empty table and flipped through a local entertainment magazine. It wasn't too long ago that this magazine determined what he would be doing on the weekends, based on what bands were at which bars. Life was simpler back then, hanging out with friends and enjoying the initial freedoms of life on your own. On second thought, maybe it wasn't simpler; maybe it was a case of different expectations. The concern was more with finding a job rather than losing one. He ate his pizza slowly, trying to prolong his lunch as much as possible. He had to admit it, he was afraid to go back to work.

By the time he made it back to the office an hour had gone by. He checked his voice mail and e-mail but no messages waited for him. George was busy in his own cube and Todd felt both a little bit of relief and embarrassment for spending the past hour or two worrying so much. He sat down, began to work and let his mind go blank.

Todd whistled as he waited for a report to finish running. He sensed someone approach his cube and then received both the figurative and literal tap on his shoulder.

"Todd? Could you come with us for a minute?"

He turned to see his supervisor standing next to a woman he recognized from

the cafeteria but couldn't name. Neither would look him in the eye. Although he had been steeling himself for this possibility the reality of the situation felt like a punch to the stomach: a quick watering of the eyes followed by an inability to catch his breath. For a second Todd couldn't focus, much less get up to follow. He was losing his job.

He didn't know how long he sat there before he was finally able to rise and start the march. The woman had to be from Human Resources. What a terrible job it must be to lay off people, he thought. Although his mind was buzzing in a fog, one thing he did notice was his soon to be former co-workers watching him as he walked past. He knew they felt a degree of sympathy, but more relief that it wasn't them walking to their doom. He knew because he had felt that way more than once during the past few hours. The phrase 'dead man walking' came to mind. The three of them rode the elevator to the fifth floor and walked toward a row of conference rooms. This must be the war room, he thought. The center of restructuring, or downsizing, or resizing – whatever they were calling it these days.

A large stack of papers and folders waited for the HR woman. Todd knew that they couldn't all be for him and for a brief moment he felt a pang of empathy for this woman, for whom Todd would not be the first nor last person who walked into this room today.

"Please, Todd, have a seat," she said.

Todd turned but his supervisor had already left the room. Thanks for the support, he thought. He looked around the room, and took in the nice cherry table and bad art. There was likely more money spent on the few pictures hanging in this room than it will cost to pay his severance, and to Todd it looked like an indecipherable collage of calming colors. Probably not what the artist had in mind when he or she picked up a brush for the first time.

"Do they teach you how to fire people in college?" Todd asked, the pressure

that had built up in his head searching for any way out.

“Actually, they did cover it in one of my Masters’ classes.”

“And they say colleges today don’t teach practical workplace skills.”

He did not feel as glib as he sounded. The two thoughts that kept running through his brain were ‘I’m getting fired,’ and ‘what am I going to do now?’ He tried to think about how much cash he had in the bank and knew it wasn’t the six month’s worth to live on that experts suggested. He hadn’t bothered to update his resume in at least three years, hadn’t written a cover letter in more than five, and didn’t even want to think about the interview process. This must be somewhat similar to getting divorced and reentering the dating scene: where to start, how to begin, how to sell oneself.

“Due to the need to consolidate costs and gain the efficiencies of the combined workforce, certain positions in the company have been deemed redundant, and are therefore being eliminated. The position of Senior Financial Analyst, in the Genesee office, is one of those to be eliminated. As part of the change-of-control agreement signed on the day the acquisition took effect, with five-plus years of service you are entitled to a severance payment equivalent to six months of your current salary, to be paid on a bi-monthly schedule. You will receive the continuation of health insurance during that six-month period. You are entitled to a bonus estimated on the first-quarter financial performance of the company and you will also have outsourcing training and resources available for those six months. You are eligible for unemployment compensation. You will be paid for any unused vacation days and will be considered to have left the company in good standing. This means that if in the future a position opens for which you are qualified, you will be fully considered. Do you have any questions?”

“I have a lot of questions,” Todd said. “But I don’t think you could answer any of them.”

He looked at the woman, who in turn looked across the table at him. She looked exhausted, and the afternoon was still young. Her hair, which in the few other times he had seen her was loose and flowing, was severely pulled back and pinned. It was better to not have the distraction of hair flopping in your face on a day such as this.

“Well,” she said as she slid a business card toward him. “I don’t expect that you will process and remember all of this information, so when you do have any questions, please give me a call.”

Todd, accompanied by the woman, left the conference room in an addled state of mind. He had known for weeks that this could have been a possibility, but in all of his mental scenarios he had stood tall and told certain executives exactly what he thought of both them and the company. A rational part of him accepted that the easiest thing for all involved was for him to quietly make his exit; still, his meekness in the face of reality humbled him, but not as much as the sight of empty boxes waiting at his cube. He was expected to clear his belongings out now, while someone stood over his shoulder. No transition, no chance to call other employees and say goodbye, no tying up of loose ends. He couldn’t even go through his computer files and trash some of the personal documents he had saved. Everything on the hard drive belonged to the company now. Somewhere in his brain he understood the thinking; no need for disgruntled employees, rather, ex-employees, to go trashing important files. It was sad to him that after five-plus years his personal belongings could fit into two boxes, but then he didn’t have the wall of family photos that some people had.

“All done?” the HR woman asked.

Todd didn’t answer. He sat down in the chair and looked out the window one last time. The red brick of the church tower stood in sharp contrast to the brilliant blue of the cloudless sky. It didn’t seem fair that the sun should be shining on a day such as this. Where were the clouds, the ominous roll of thunder? He stared at the stained-glass

saint and realized that he had not discovered whom the artwork was supposed to represent. It struck him that the downward glance of the saint was not meant to indicate prayer, but rather it now appeared that the saint was embarrassed for Todd. Maybe the icon knew this day was coming. Maybe that was religion's secret to popularity: the reality of the world was that days like this came for everyone at some point.

He picked up one of the boxes while the woman grabbed the other. Todd knew his face was burning from embarrassment as he turned to leave his cube. He peered into George's cube to say goodbye but his co-worker was not there. Todd hoped he wasn't in the process of being laid-off but he doubted anybody in his group would survive the purge. He wouldn't have thought so, but the act that was hardest for Todd, the one that proved how final this was, was when he was asked to turn in his ID badge. He had spent five years laughing about his photo and hated having to always have it visible on his body, but when he was asked to hand it over it was like the cutting of the umbilical cord.

He didn't answer the phone that night, or even check his messages. He didn't turn on the television, he didn't taste the dinner he made; he didn't do much of anything other than lie on his couch and think. And the more he thought the angrier he became. He could see getting fired if he wasn't doing a good job, but that wasn't the case. So where was the justice in coming to work every day and doing the best that you could and then being told you weren't needed? It was one of those things that you knew existed in the world but never thought would happen to you. Todd understood that he was feeling sorry for himself but decided that self-pity was okay for one night. He thought about his 401(k) account and how much money he had lost due to the recent collapse of his now ex-company's stock. Every day it seemed the share price dropped

lower and lower as the Susan Loserios of the world told employees that things would turn around, told them to keep the faith. So employees like him bought more shares, unbalanced their portfolios, cut their own throats, and slowly drank the company Kool-Aid. Between the plunge in company stock and the market's general malaise, Todd's account was not much higher than it had been when he had started with the company. So basically, the 10 percent of his salary he had been socking away for the past five years was gone. Thanks for playing, stop back later for another try.

Sleep did not come easy that night and he awoke for good when the combination of hearing the footsteps of the people in the apartment upstairs and the traffic of those going to work drove him to get up. He ventured outside – for the first time since getting home the afternoon before – to grab the paper. It almost felt like a weekend to Todd, since normally he brought the paper to work with him. He made a pot of coffee and sat down to try and read the sports section. The concentration wasn't there so he called his voice mail at the office and received a message saying the number was no longer in use. He tried George's extension and received the same message, and that knowledge made Todd realize that tears had begun to push their way out of his eyes. He tried to read the paper again and noticed an article about yesterday's layoffs. A company spokesman was quoted as saying the reductions were necessary so that the company could move forward and be successful. Todd had to read the next part twice: 'It's never easy to lose people but there is every confidence that we now have the right people in place and that our employees are committed to making this work.'

"Bullshit. Bullshit." Todd yelled. "You don't know who I am, you probably didn't know any of the people you fired. We were all committed."

He threw the business page down and covered his face with his hands. He couldn't remember feeling this angry and this helpless at the same time. More than ever he felt as if his apartment was simply a box that now crowded in on him. Solace was

not offered here, it was not a bastion against the outside world: it was a place to sleep. When he was able to compose himself he noticed a teaser ad in the paper promoting an upcoming feature on The Avenger. Maybe now that he had some free time on his hands he would give Karen more to write about. There were a lot of people in the world that needed to be avenged. He brought his coffee with him to the couch and curled up. The next thing he knew he was awakened by the buzzer to his apartment. He wished the noise would go away but it persisted. He finally got up and walked over to the intercom.

“Yeah?” he said.

“It’s Matt.”

Todd closed his eyes and sighed. He wasn’t ready to explain what happened to anybody quite yet but he told his brother he would be down in a second. The thinking was that if he didn’t let Matt into his apartment then he might be able to get rid of him quicker. Todd walked out and opened the door to his complex and immediately realized that a T-shirt and shorts were the wrong clothes to be wearing.

“What do you want?” Todd asked.

“I wanted to see what was going on,” Matt replied. “I saw in the paper this morning that your company had lay-offs and I called you at work to see if you were affected. When the message said the number wasn’t working I got nervous, so I thought I would swing by on my way to the paper.”

“You’re going to work? What time is it?”

“About two-thirty.”

“Christ.” Todd figured he must have slept on the couch for a couple of hours.

“Well, your journalistic instincts were correct. I am no longer employed.”

“What happened?”

“Did you read the article?”

“Yeah, but . . .”

“Well then you know. Yesterday I was told that my position was no longer deemed necessary to the future success of the company.”

“What are you going to do?” Matt asked.

“Well, I’m either going to have a beer or take a nap. Maybe both.”

“I meant in the future.”

“Matt, do you think I know yet? I haven’t exactly had a lot of time to figure it out.”

Todd hugged himself to try and keep warm. He looked up and watched the clouds parade past in formation, pushed by a stronger wind than could be felt on the ground. A huge black cloud came into view and looked to Todd like the silhouette of a swooping hawk, with the sun acting as its gleaming eye. He rarely could find images in clouds but this one was like a message from the gods: be The Avenger. Within a couple seconds the cloud had shifted shape and no longer bore resemblance to anything other than the wispy strands of cotton candy being pulled apart.

“Listen. Go to work and I’ll talk to you in the next day or two,” Todd said, and started to go back inside.

“All right,” Matt said. “I’ll get going. But don’t hide inside forever, you’ll get beyond this.”

“Hide? *You’re* telling *me* not to hide?” Todd felt the anger he had been carrying since yesterday, amplified by a sudden resentment toward Matt’s ‘ignorance is bliss’ mentality, spew into a diatribe. “Hiding is all you’ve ever done, Matt. You hide in your house. You hide in your job. You hide in words and books. That’s where you have always gone because a book or a newspaper won’t hurt you. You play it safe so the world won’t bite you in the ass. Well here’s a news flash for you, copy boy; the real world sucks and everything about it wants to hurt you. You can’t hide behind words

forever.”

He turned around and went back inside the complex, his brother left standing on the sidewalk. Feeling emptied, he thought again of the cloud. Be The Avenger. It was as if someone had whispered the command into his brain and he had no choice but to obey.

Todd stood at the entrance to the unemployment office, not quite ready to humble himself enough to walk in. At first he had thought that he might not bother with filing – he wasn’t looking for any hand-outs – but the reality of not knowing how long he would be out of work made the money available from unemployment more palatable. Not that there was inherently anything wrong with it, but Todd had always felt that unemployment was the realm of losers. If you had a brain and a little ambition you should be able to find a job. Plus, whoever designed the building and picked the location did not make it easy for those a little antsy about the process. The office was an ugly, gray featureless slab of concrete housed in a section of town that Todd had never known existed. On the other side of the street were a check-cashing business and a liquor store, two businesses whose owners had, if not ethics, at least a working knowledge of human behavior.

Part of his struggle to make it to the office was what to wear. How does one dress to receive free money? After looking at a few different choices he decided on a pair of khakis and a polo shirt, pretty much what he wore to work every day. He quickly discovered that he shouldn’t have wasted so much mental energy on his quandary. Nearly every other male in the place was in a T-shirt and jeans at best. Some wore outfits that Todd would have been embarrassed to mow the lawn in. He asked himself why he didn’t use the option to phone in the information. One reason was he

wanted to go through the orientation to see how his tax money had been spent. The amount he would receive – \$405 a week for six months, with the possibility of a 13-week extension – was determined by his final salary. Add in the severance pay and it was a pretty good deal – if he could find a new job in the interim.

He sat in a group of around twenty people and filled out a three-page form asking for information about his past employment, job skills and education. Workshops were available for résumé writing and interview skills, but for the moment he passed on those. He just needed to learn that every week he had to call in to continue to receive the checks. Only after a few months would he have to meet with someone to discuss his progress. Pretty easy money if you could swallow your dignity, not to mention that the six months would carry him through the summer. He was free to enjoy life and felt like he was back in school again, only this time carrying a few bucks in his pocket.

Todd turned off the TV and decided it was time. The clock read one-thirty in the morning; by the time he loaded his car and traveled across town it would be two. Unless the neighbors were like him – bored and unemployed – they would be sleeping. Two weeks had passed since his trip to the unemployment office and the only plans he had made were for this evening. He locked his apartment door and went down into the storage room. Each of the tenants was allowed a cell that they could padlock if so desired. Most of what Todd kept in here was boxes that he hadn't looked at the contents of in years but couldn't bring himself to throw out. This would be one advantage of owning a home, he thought, room to spread out. The smell hit him as soon as he entered the room. He hoped that no one had complained to the office yet but decided it hadn't been there for that long. The two garbage bags sat right in front,

waiting for him when he unlocked the door to his storage area. He struggled up the short flight of stairs and dragged the bags outside to his car. He had to clear some space in his trunk to fit the bags, moving aside old cassette tape cartridges, softball equipment and a snow brush. When he pulled out of the complex he started to feel the giddiness that was becoming addictive. Part of him knew it was dangerous to get swept away, to love this feeling so much. He needed to keep a level head when acting as The Avenger and he never wanted to need the rush so much that he wasn't careful, or at least choosy, on what deeds of revenge he enacted.

He passed a police car and forced himself to calm down and control his driving. Although he had nothing to fear from the police, the bars were about to close and the cops would be looking to pull over erratic drivers. He slowed to a crawl as he neared the road he was looking for. In the dark it was harder to remember where to go but soon he saw the street sign. He triple checked the address he had written down before he positioned his car to face the direction heading out of the subdivision and then parked on the side of the road. He looked at the houses around him to ascertain if any lights were on, to search for any signs of life; he found none. He opened the trunk and lugged the two garbage bags across the street and onto the front lawn. As he opened the first bag Todd took another glance around him and reveled in the silence. He knew pulling a job like this would not be possible in the city, since someone, somewhere, was always up and about. He worked quickly as he emptied the contents of the bag while he walked backwards. He tried to keep the lines straight as he finished the first bag and began to unload the second. When he was finished he walked back to his car and surveyed the results. An 'A' made up of discarded cigarette butts covered much of the front lawn. It wasn't as pretty as he would have liked but it wouldn't be prudent to stick around and beautify. He took a business card from his wallet and impaled it on a stick, which he then placed in the ground within the 'A.' He admired his handiwork for

another few seconds until a dog began to bark, which Todd read as a warning alarm to get moving. He drove to the nearest pay phone he could find and called the police, the newspaper and the local television stations to tip them off. It was too early for the media to be at work but he hoped they could get some shots before his creation was cleaned up. All in all, Todd thought, not a bad night's work; The Avenger had struck again. He couldn't wait to see if he would make the news. It had to be somewhat like a musician who hears his song on the radio. But even if the media didn't show it would have been worth it. What a gratifying gig this was turning out to be, and he was already thinking of what The Avenger could come up with next. Granted, this one was minor, albeit enjoyable. He wondered if the guy would even understand why it had happened. But even as he made his way back home a thought began to burrow its way into his consciousness, like when a lash gets trapped in your eye and irritates with every blink: when are you going to do something real, something more than fodder for the nightly news? He doubted that he would be able to fall back asleep, but what the hell, he had no place to be in the morning. On the drive home, happy Avenger thoughts were being displaced with real life fears of unemployment. Well, he thought, that high didn't last long.

5

The life of a copy editor: work hours; 6 p.m. to 2 a.m., schedule; Tuesday through Saturday if you were one of the lucky ones who received two days off in a row, social life; zero. Few options existed when you worked nights and weekends and finished your shift when the bars closed. Sure, Matt thought, he could go back to school and take some classes, but what would he do? He didn't want another degree. For the most part he liked his job. He had the chance to work with some of the more intelligent people he knew and as an added bonus, copy editors got the benefit of arguing about grammar. And even after nearly ten years in the business Matt still got a kick out of working for a newspaper. Each time he walked through the revolving door that led into the *Genesee Gazette-Herald* he imagined the people on the street being impressed, wondering who it was that had just entered. They might not be long for this world, at least in the form we know them by now, but Matt believed – and you had to believe when you worked in journalism – that newspapers played an important role in the community. They informed people of what they needed to know. Matt was never one of those “All the President’s Men” J-school grads who wanted to bring down every public official. Not that Matt and his fellow journalists believed that the paper was

perfect. Actually, he thought, as much as the public might bitch about the paper's coverage, the employees bitched even more. When a paper such as the one Matt worked for was part of a nationwide conglomerate, the best interests of shareholders often obscured professional standards. Not that Matt believed they ever ignored stories, but the "important" in-depth looks at subjects and agendas pushed by the powers that be sometimes got in the way of news.

One problem of a journalist's lifestyle was that they tended to lose sight that there was an actual world out there. Everything that happened was thought of from a work standpoint – where in the paper should it go, how important was it – not necessarily from a human perspective. A train derailed? What story can be moved off of 1A to make room? No one died? Okay, put it below the fold. It was easy to become detached from life rather than live it. Matt knew he could be doing something more with his life but he was comfortable, and comfort was the death of ambition.

Every once in a while Matt would stop what he was doing and think about The Avenger. Everyone who collected comics dreamed at one point of becoming a super hero. As much as you knew it wasn't possible, you allowed some small corner of your brain to harbor the hope that you *could* get bit by a radioactive spider and develop special powers. Matt ached to have the ability to fly through the evening sky, or swing among the skyscrapers. And now someone was doing it. Not with super powers, at least as far as anyone knew, but fighting bad guys and righting wrongs.

Another Avenger story had come in last night. The police got a phone call tipping them off that this guy suspected of knocking off a couple of banks was tied to a telephone pole. When the police arrived, the man complained that he had been robbed, and he very well might have been, but he was going to jail all the same. Tucked between the rope and the man was another one of The Avenger's business cards.

Matt knew that the editors at the paper were toying with the idea of running a

big piece on The Avenger. Karen would likely get the story, since she had the police contacts. The problem was, no one knew much about The Avenger and he seemed to be developing an edge that the bosses weren't so sure they wanted to overly publicize. Take last night for example; The Avenger caught the bank robber but he did rob that person. Robin Hood may be a romantic hero, but if The Avenger stole, then he, too, broke the law. So taking into account the copycat society of today, did the paper want to give even more attention to The Avenger? The cynical answer was yes, because it would probably sell a ton of papers. And it was definitely more exciting than continued government discussions on revitalizing downtown, not to mention that television was doing the story to death. But where, Matt wondered, were the facts?

It was ten-thirty and 1A had almost been put to bed when a loud 'oh shit' came from the news desk. Everyone on the copy desk looked up to see a couple of the news editors huddled in front of a computer terminal. Charley MacBride, the copy desk chief, got up to see what was happening and suddenly it seemed as if everyone was moving at once. Matt saved the story he was editing and joined the mob. He saw that the layout editor had already begun to redesign the front page and then he heard the news. The Chief Financial Officer of Parker Corporation, Todd's ex-company, had been found in his hotel room with a gunshot wound. No word yet on how or why he had been shot.

The paper had a fluff story about improvement in city schools in place for the centerpiece and the decision needed to be made in about one minute if they were going to change the page. Frank Cooper, the news editor, was on the phone calling the managing editor at home. From a news angle the choice was a no-brainer, but Matt knew they had been promoting this school story for a couple of days. It wouldn't be

fair to the readers not to run it and it wouldn't be fair to the story to chop it from fifty inches to ten. It would be nice to know more details of what happened to the executive.

There were so many decisions to make at a time such as this: which story or stories do you take off of the front page, where do you put them, do you redo entire sections past deadline? Stressful stuff, and it was because of a terrible incident, Matt acknowledged, but this was what brought the newsroom to life. So much of their time was dull that when news broke everyone came alive. Matt didn't want to belittle the armed forces with this comparison, but a situation such as this was what they all were trained for; this was their battle. Matt believed that the paper functioned well on a daily basis but at a time like this it shone. This was why they were in journalism.

One of the televisions constantly left on just broadcast an announcement that the shooting appeared to be a suicide attempt. The editors started to move on that but tempered themselves by acknowledging that nothing had been confirmed. TV news was much more immediate, but had on more than one occasion provided erroneous information. Matt looked at the clock and knew that the deadline had passed and they needed to pick an angle. This could be bad because by the time they got 250,000 papers out and people read them, the police could have found an alleged murderer and the paper would look foolish.

Frank got off the phone and yelled that they were redoing everything. Someone called the press room to alert them that some of the pages that had already been sent were changing and that a couple more would be late. The editors also had to know from the press room what the drop-dead deadline was for turning in changes.

Unfortunately for Matt, he was working slot tonight so he was stuck redoing the stories that had already been finished so he could fit them in their new holes. Repetitive stuff made difficult by the fact that lengths had already been determined and the stories cut once, so it wasn't easy to re-edit, and even harder to rewrite a headline

whose count had been altered. But this was a team effort and Matt was a utility infielder tonight, not the all-star pitcher.

The decision was made to keep the local centerpiece in its place and strip the shooting across the top of the page. Give the story the big headline to draw the readers' eye. Matt had less than 30 minutes to reconfigure four stories. A couple of the sports guys wandered down to offer their help. They were the only others in the newsroom at this time of night. Matt lobbed a silent curse toward the business staff, who would understand the implications of this story best but who only worked day hours, since they always claimed that was when businesses were running. The layout editor sent Matt the first two stories with new lengths assigned. The first was a wire story about a new study promoting the benefits of drinking red wine that needed to be cut from ten inches to six. Normally wire stories were easier to edit than local ones since you didn't have to worry about the reporter getting pissed. It was the old inverted pyramid theory – cut from the bottom. But this story had a local quote from the man who owned the biggest wine shop in the area and Matt knew he needed to keep that in. The second story concerned a new theory on why dinosaurs became extinct.

Matt was almost finished with the fourth story when he heard someone say that the CFO was still alive, but no one was quite clear about his condition or had any details about the shooting. Now that the absolute deadline was upon them, the question became what slant to take with the treatment? How many readers would wake up and not know the executive had been shot? Do they educate the readers on the event and then supply the condition or does the staff assume the readers know what happened and simply update them?

Parker CFO critical with gunshot wound

Gunman, motive unknown

as executive treated at Mercy

People might get their paper a half-hour late tomorrow but the night had been worth it. Everyone in the room was in that exhausted-but-wired-with-excitement state, one that each of them knew would be strictly exhaustion soon enough. Many times after a night like this they would go somewhere to relive the evening over a few drinks, not unlike Matt's softball team, who would regurgitate every play at the bar. Unfortunately, the bars had been closed for 30 minutes and so people started drifting out, left to explain the evening to a tired spouse or friend who wouldn't quite get it anyway.

Matt scrolled the wires looking at the box scores of the West Coast baseball games, checking to see how the players on his fantasy team performed. The next time he looked up the only person left in the newsroom was Frank Cooper, who leaned back in his chair with his feet crossed and resting on a desk. Frank was what they called a grizzled veteran. He was an anomaly in today's newsrooms – a news editor who was not young and on the way up the corporate ladder. Most people in his position had been hand-picked by the powers that be as someone with a future. News Editor was a position that acted as a stepping stone for bigger things, but Frank filled in between corporate promotions, and even when he had a boss who was thirty years his junior, Frank still had a say in what went in the paper. His full head of hair was more white than gray but he could still be intimidating when he rose to his full height. Matt watched him reach down to open a drawer at his desk.

"Ahh, there she is," Frank said. "It's been too long."

Matt didn't have to wonder for long what Frank was referring to. He pulled out a bottle of booze – Scotch, whiskey, Matt couldn't tell the difference from his vantage point – and a couple of coffee cups. He gave two generous pours, moved into a chair

opposite Matt, and set the cups between them.

“Knock it back,” he told Matt. “This was a good night for journalism.”

Matt picked up the cup and took a darting peek around the newsroom.

“Don’t get nervous on me, Matthew.”

“We could get fired for this, you know.”

“Christ. Newsmen have been drinking booze since forever. It wasn’t too many years ago when everyone in here had a bottle tucked away.”

Matt watched as Frank put the cup to his mouth and shuddered the liquid down. The older man’s face began to relax and the skin lost the tautness that provided the hard edge that Frank needed to get the job done. Craggy eyebrows now simply looked bushy and Matt saw him as almost grandfatherly, a description which he had never before equated with the man.

“One to slam and one to sip,” Frank said, and poured himself another.

“Nothing wrong with a little toast to a job well done.”

“Do you do this every night?” Matt asked. He knew Frank normally left after him but he never realized Frank was the last to go. But then again, maybe the bottle was shared with many.

“You think *I* drink, let me tell you about some of the people that were here when I was your age.” Frank undid the top button on his dress shirt and loosened the tight knot of his tie.

Matt looked at the clock behind the row of televisions. 3:00. He guessed that he wasn’t going to do much besides sleep until his next shift.

“There used to be a bar around the corner from here called The Post. This was the place that all the news guys hung out. Back when downtown had a pulse after 5 p.m.”

Frank paused to take a sip. Matt did as well, but Scotch was never a favorite

and he knew that unless he drank it as a shot he would never finish it.

“Remember,” Frank continued, eyeing Matt with humor at his struggle. “This was back in the days when the *Herald* was around as an afternoon paper. Back when people cared about the world and wanted more information than a sound bite on the damn TV.”

“You’re sounding bitter, Frank,” Matt said.

“Why shouldn’t I be bitter? I worked twenty-five years for that paper and then corporate tells us that circulation is down and people’s lifestyles don’t include reading a newspaper in the evening anymore.”

Matt had been at the morning paper for about six months when the decision was made to scrap the afternoon edition. The same company owned both papers, had them running out of the same building and not only were there hard feelings about the demise of the one paper, but the management expected the two staffs to merge. The papers each had half of the newsroom, and for years there was competition, bordering on animosity, between the staffs. After all, they competed for the same story and would rather scoop each other than the TV stations. When Matt began his job the concept had started to change. The *Herald* had slowly become a glorified later edition of the *Gazette* in the morning and the slowly merging staff began to work on both. This way it was easy for the bosses to pull the plug since the *Herald* didn’t really offer too much “news.” It amazed Matt to think that someone in a distant office dreamed up these scenarios that might take five or more years to reach fruition, but that was probably why he was still at work at three in the morning while that person was hard asleep.

“Anyway,” Frank said, pulling Matt back. “Don Barber was the name of the Metro editor when I started out. This guy would show up for work at five in the morning. No big deal until you heard that he would get out of work around three or four every afternoon and head straight for The Post, not leaving until midnight. And he

did this at least five days a week. He was my hero.”

Matt heard a set of keys jangling and watched the night security guy make his way toward them. He was one of those anonymous Pinkerton temps that wore jackets two sizes too big and probably hated real police officers.

“Hello, James”

“Hey, Frank.”

Matt didn’t know if he was more surprised that Frank didn’t try to hide his Scotch or that he knew the security guy’s name. It again made Matt wonder how many others had shared the cup he was holding. He must have had an odd expression because Frank chuckled at him as he put his feet back on his desk.

“Always try to know every one you can,” he said. “You never know who will someday be in a position to help you, or at least not hurt you. Which brings me back to Don Barber. Some people looked at him as, if not a drunk, at least too heavy of a drinker. Which he may well have been, but let me tell you he was one of the smartest men I ever knew. He would spend half of his life at The Post, but while he was there he would get to know every one that walked through those doors. He would act as a mentor for the young reporters – me included – but you know who else frequented that bar?” Frank swung his feet down and leaned toward Matt, shoving a finger toward his face. “Politicians, cops, lawyers. It may be hard to believe in this day and age but this city once had a night life, and The Post was central to a lot of what happened. I can’t tell you how many deals were cut, leads passed, favors done just because of that bar. Don Barber was a great editor because he knew the city and he knew the people in the city. Now they bring in somebody from out of town who lives in the suburbs and doesn’t set foot anywhere in the city except to walk into and out of this building. How the hell do they expect great coverage when the editors don’t know the subject they are supposed to be covering?”

Matt didn't answer, partly because he wasn't sure if Frank was being rhetorical and partly because he couldn't think of anything to say other than 'damn straight.' He tried not to get into the political aspect of who the boss was today. Those on the copy desk tended to be there for the long haul. They weren't rising through the corporate ranks. They didn't consider this city, this paper, a stepping stone for bigger things. The most Matt could aspire to was being the copy desk chief, and he had a hard time imagining that ever happening. Charley MacBride was still relatively young and even after all these years Matt was still in the lower half seniority-wise out of the eight people on the copy desk.

"Another?" Frank asked, motioning the bottle toward Matt.

"No thanks. This is a little harsh for me."

"Puppy," Frank said with a laugh. "So Matthew, when are you going to get some balls and try to advance in the world?"

"What do you mean?" Matt's second wind had long petered out and he wasn't sure if he had missed the direction that Frank had taken the conversation.

"What I mean is, are you going to remain a copy editor for the rest of your life? Not that there's anything wrong with that if that's what you want, but I know that you're capable of more."

"There's a lot of people that have been here longer than me."

"That's true. And they've made their choice. Look at Art. He's been a copy editor for twenty years and he'll probably be one for another twenty."

"Do you think there will be newspapers twenty years from now?"

"Hell, yeah. You can't take a computer into the can with you. But don't change the subject."

"I could maybe see myself as Copy Desk Chief, but I don't think Charley is going anywhere soon."

“Expand your view, Matthew. It’s possible to move away from the copy desk. You could be a news editor. You have a good eye for what’s important and you care. That’s a pretty good combination. And don’t you want to decide what goes in rather than fix what goes in?”

Matt had never been good at taking compliments and he could feel himself blush. During his stint at the paper he had rarely if ever thought about moving to the management side of the staff. Not to mention he had never been overtly encouraged to do so.

“Is there an opening? Who would I talk to?”

“Matthew, I just spent the past few minutes telling you how great you were and then you follow it up with a stupid question. I may be old but I still have a little bit of influence on what transpires in this room. You’re single, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Matt said, embarrassed to admit his romantic failings.

“This is a good life for someone who’s single.”

“Aren’t you married?”

“Like I said, this is a good life for someone who’s single.” Frank laughed at his joke and Matt tried to force out a chuckle that he knew sounded more like a clearing of his nasal passages. “Seriously,” Frank said. “The hours are tough on a marriage, even tougher when you have kids.”

Frank sat up and put the bottle of Scotch back in its hiding place. He groaned as he stood up and then stretched as he let out a yawn.

“I’m getting too old for this four-in-the-morning crap,” he said. “Think about what I said, Matthew, but don’t wait too long. You never know the next time I’ll be replaced. And again, nice job tonight.”

“Hey, Frank. Can I ask you a question?” Now that he was on more candid terms with his possible future boss, Matt wanted to have him validate his own

impression.

“Shoot.”

“What do you think of The Avenger?”

“Just some punk with too much time on his hands.” Frank turned and started to amble down the hallway to the elevators. “See you in a few hours.”

Matt wasn't surprised by Frank's reaction to The Avenger, although he had hoped for something closer to his views. He was learning that people tended to be cynical about heroes, unable to accept that someone out there might be trying to do something to help. Society churned through its stars these days, pronouncing greatness before it was deserved and then knocking them down for sometimes the same reasons for which they were lionized to begin with. Matt preferred the simpler view of idolizing from a distance without digging to find something that shows how human even the stars can be.

He shut his terminal off and took a look around the newsroom. It was a football field shaped room, filled with desks overflowing with stacks of paper, reference books and anything else a reporter needed to be at hand. He doubted a normal office could be allowed to look this cluttered. It was calm now, but in a few short hours the crank would again start creaking to begin the daily process. He took the stairs to the first floor and, as he walked past the security desk that welcomed visitors, he saw the stack of morning papers that had already been printed. It seemed such a short time ago that he was redoing much of the 'A' section and even after all these years it amazed him how fast the press room could churn out 200,000-odd papers. He read the headline about the shooting and hoped that the CFO hadn't died, more he realized because it would hurt the validity of the paper than actually caring about the businessman. Caring would come later, after he got some sleep. He walked outside and saw that the world around him was just showing the early signs of waking up. It reminded him of his first job as a

cook with the overnight shift at a 24-hour restaurant. The sun would not rise for more than an hour but some people were beginning their days and Matt wondered if anyone really worked a nine-to-five job anymore. He thought of Todd and mouthed a silent plea that his brother would bounce back from his employment setback.

He drove home and entered his house, the dullness of which jumped out at him this morning like it rarely had before. The house had three bedrooms and one-and-a-half baths, none of which stood out. He had been in the house for nearly five years now and had not done much more than repaint a few of the rooms. Aspects of the décor, such as the wallpaper in the kitchen, which he had initially abhorred, now barely caught his attention. A few framed art reproductions hung on the walls; a Monet he had bought at an exhibition he went to in Buffalo held a prominent spot in the living room and a Magritte relaxed in his bedroom. Matt felt comfortable here but he had never made a huge effort to make the house his. He had yet to turn one of the extra bedrooms into a library or sports room as he thought he would. Maybe he had no unique tastes that would allow him to redecorate and stake his claim. Matt's philosophy had always been if it didn't bother him, why change it? Which is also apparently how he had been considering his job. Frank had made it clear that an opportunity was available if he was interested, and now Matt had to decide if he was interested. Being an editor – even if as an assistant – meant more money, more prestige, more hours and more stress. What Matt had to ponder was on which side the scale tipped. He was happy being a copy editor and could visualize himself doing that for the foreseeable future. Could he see himself as a news editor someday? Maybe way off in the distance, like a mirage wavering in the sun. But where would that be? The chain tended to promote employees by transferring them and Matt couldn't see himself moving two or three times just to get a better job. He needed to talk it over with someone but he didn't think Todd would be in the right frame of mind to discuss job opportunities. Karen would tell him to take it,

and if he mentioned it to her there was the chance that she would share the information with others at the paper, which at this stage he was against.

Matt heard the stop and start grinding of the newspaper delivery guy's car. No more paperboys and no more having it delivered to your porch. All the carriers these days were adults and they put the paper by the mailbox. Even though Matt was exhausted he decided to at least glance at the sports section. He trudged outside to grab the paper and flipped through the sections on his way back in. The business was on the back of the sports and Matt noticed the lead story was another article about Todd's ex-company. More financial stress in the form of re-stating earnings and another plunge in the stock price. Maybe, Matt thought, maybe Todd got out at the right time. And maybe, he wondered, this had something to do with the shooting. It was an angle that needed to be followed today.

On his way to the bathroom Matt passed the family picture he had framed. It was taken when he was fourteen and Todd was thirteen, when the family was on vacation in Florida and lounging on some beach he couldn't remember the name of. Someone had flagged down a man walking past to take the picture. In the photo Matt looked as if he couldn't wait for the moment to pass; after all, that was not the best age to be trapped with your parents on a beach. His father wasn't looking directly at the camera and it was as if someone or something just at the edge of his vision caught his attention and he had to get a better look. His mother, though, looked radiant, which was the reason this was the one photo of her Matt had displayed. Raven hair set against a white one-piece swimsuit that she had bought specifically for the trip. Matt was embarrassed to think that his mother once had a nice body. He calculated her age and was dismayed to realize that when the picture was taken she was only three years older than he was now. Matt couldn't conceive of having a child, much less having two teenage boys. How much more mature she must have been. He knew he was tired and

attributed some of his thought process to that, but he wondered if she would have been disappointed in how his life had turned out. He picked up the picture and stared at it. He believed it was the last picture taken of her, for she would be dead less than a month after they returned from their vacation. It would be a rare teen-age boy who would admit to needing his mother, but who would you need more? The one person who was always there, the solid presence in the house, she was the grounding that let him and Todd grow and learn who they were, knowing without even being able to articulate the concept that she would be there to catch them when they would inevitably fall. Matt could point to that summer as the time when he stopped trying so hard to figure out who he could be and reverted back to the comforts of what he knew. It might not be accurate to say that his emotional growth stultified, but he definitely leaned on and grew increasingly dependent upon the familiar. Which was why his comic book collection grew by leaps and bounds at an age when his friends began obsessing about girls.

Matt moved his focus from his mother to his father. Take away the hairstyle that was popular back then and the resemblance between him and his father was strong. As with his mother, his father was only a few years older when the photo was taken than Matt was now. It saddened him to not be able to know his father from an adult viewpoint. Matt never knew what dreams his dad had held, what he had hoped to accomplish, the sacrifices he made to provide for his family. He had never known him as a person in addition to his role as a father.

Todd was the next person in the picture that Matt studied. Whereas Matt's expression showed that he did not want to be in the photo, Todd struck an almost defiant pose, staring straight into the camera with his lips pursed and his eyes slightly shut, the reason, whether from the sun or from trying to look cool, forever lost. Like almost everything else, Todd was the opposite of Matt when it came to familial resemblance. Matt could see features of his mother in Todd but there was no sign of his

father. One year apart in age and the two boys looked so different. Genetics were an amazing thing. Matt finally set the picture down and readied himself for bed. It had been a long day with too many issues to think about. He thought back to Frank's offer and realized that soon he was going to have to decide what he wanted to do with his life. He supposed it was about time.

6

Time to put on her third wheel. Karen had been invited to dinner at the home of one of her college roommates. Marci – who until starting her career as an art director had spelled her name with a ‘y’ – had been married for seven years and, after years of trying, finally was the proud mother of a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter. This was the alterna-life, Karen thought; time to take a look at what could have been. At best, the evening would offer her the chance to reconsider, or be an affirmation of, the choices she had made over the years. At worst, she would come home and spend the evening crying in bed for a lifestyle that she doubted she would ever have.

Karen parked behind the minivan in the driveway and looked at the yard that she knew would be manicured once the weather warmed. Marci was an avid gardener and her husband, Jared, was one of those whose hedges had to be perfectly trimmed. She had bought a bottle of Chardonnay to accompany dinner and handed it to Jared, who answered the door.

“Come on in,” Jared said. “Marci will be down in a second, she’s on diaper detail. I’ll go put this in the fridge.”

Karen could hear the wailing of little Madison, obviously not enjoying being

changed. She took off her coat and waited for Jared to come back so he could hang it in the closet. When she was at the homes of other friends she would do that herself, but here she felt as if there was a protocol that needed to be followed. As always, Karen was impressed with how the home was decorated, although at floor level it appeared that Madison had taken control. Her eyes were drawn to a pair of wall sconces that were positioned over the couch in the living room. The clear glass sconces each contained a small red candle and what looked to be fresh-cut flowers. The house itself was too new for her liking, only five years old and Marci and Jared were already the second owners, but Karen had to admit that they had good taste. Whereas most people she knew had prints or reproductions of paintings hanging on the wall, Marci and Jared owned originals, albeit from local artists yet to make a name for themselves.

“Let’s go say hi to Aunt Karen.”

Karen turned to see Marci and Madison making their way down the stairs. Karen had never liked it when people referred to friends as Aunt and Uncle. Madison had her head buried in Marci’s neck, too shy for the moment to look at Karen except for the occasional peek. Marci still sported the pixie hairdo she had had since college, but the style looked good with her heart-shaped face.

“She is so cute,” Karen said to Marci. “You are so cute,” this time directed toward the toddler. Karen gave Marci as much of a hug as possible, and then reached toward Madison, who wanted nothing to do with her.

“Don’t take it personally,” Marci said. “It takes her some time to warm up to everyone. So how are you? I’ve been seeing your name on the front page lately. You’re getting to be quite the star.”

“I’m just riding the coattails of The Avenger. Work is going great, though.”

They went to sit in the living room where Madison undid in a minute what Karen knew must have taken Marci some time to clean and organize. Books, stuffed

animals and miscellaneous toys soon covered half the floor.

“She would love it if you got down and played with her,” Marci said.

Karen sat cross-legged on the floor and began to read the book closest to her. Madison turned her head, and after a few pages made her way near Karen. The singsong rhythm was catchy and Karen adored the illustrations. She finished the book and set it down and immediately Madison picked the book back up and handed it to Karen.

“She wants you to read it again,” Marci said.

Karen started over, feeling more comfortable with the flow of words and allowing herself to sound more expressive. Madison backed up and plopped herself down on Karen’s legs. Karen leaned over and kissed the top of Madison’s head and breathed in the clean smell of the toddler.

“I’m going into the kitchen to see if Jared needs any help,” Marci said.

As soon as Marci started walking away Madison scrambled out of Karen’s lap and ran toward her mother.

“Mommy. Mommy,” she cried as she hugged the back of Marci’s legs.

“Come on, babe,” Marci said. She picked Madison up and looked at Karen.

“We’ll be right back,” she said. “You gotta love separation anxiety.”

Karen remained on the living room floor and picked through some of the other books strewn about. A collection of nursery rhymes was within reach and she scanned the contents. She was surprised at how few of them she remembered and wondered whether her parents had skipped this part of her childhood. She thought of Madison sitting on her lap and how nice that felt. She countered that by remembering how good it felt to have Marci comment on her Avenger articles, even though it should be expected that a friend would say something nice. For a brief moment she allowed herself to think about whether it was true that she was becoming a star. If so, she

hadn't earned anything yet. If she discovered who The Avenger was, then maybe praise would be deserved. But simply being the one who reported his actions? That didn't qualify as star status to her. She picked up a stuffed puppy and held it close.

"Doggy. Woof, woof, woof."

Karen turned to see Madison running toward her. She moved the toy so it tickled Madison in the face, and then in the belly, then back to the face. Madison giggled and Karen wondered if there was any better feeling in the world than being able to make a child laugh.

"You seem like a natural," Marci said.

Karen stood up and walked toward the kitchen. "It's easy when they're in a good mood. I'm not sure how natural I would be if she started screaming right now."

"Do you want anything to drink?" Marci asked.

"Well, I was wanting to try that Chardonnay I brought. Rumor has it it's tasty."

"That sounds good. I might try a glass myself."

"Well, you always were the wine drinker of the group," Karen said. "What was that stuff you used to buy? Something German I think."

"Liebfraumilch?"

"That's it. You could buy some of that for three or four bucks a bottle."

"We tried some a couple of months ago and it was terrible. It was so sweet, almost like drinking sugar water. I don't know what we were thinking back then."

"We were thinking it was three or four bucks a bottle."

Karen watched Jared move around the kitchen, trying to time everything. It seemed like a lot of work, but then Karen rarely cooked for more than just herself so she didn't attempt complicated meals. She helped Marci set the table while at the same time bending down a few times to take a crayon that Madison would shove toward her.

"All right," Jared said. "I think we're ready."

Dinner was seafood pasta for the adults and fish sticks and peas for Madison. To be able to eat like this every night would be great, Karen thought, although she assumed they went to a little bit of trouble for her. On the surface, Marci looked to have a great life – a beautiful daughter, a husband who cooked – but as with everything, there had to be compromises. Her reverie was interrupted by Madison, who had a few peas in her hand and was holding them toward Karen.

“She wants to put them in your mouth,” Marci said. “She doesn’t share like that with everybody, you must be the chosen one tonight.”

“Lucky me,” Karen said.

She bent toward the girl and opened her mouth. Madison nearly shoved her entire fist in Karen’s mouth and struggled to let go of the peas.

“Yummy,” Karen said, and hoped she sounded more convincing than she felt. She had to choke down the cold, smooshed peas and took a swig of wine to help the vegetables along. She looked at Madison, who had picked up more peas and was again reaching toward Karen.

“Madison, I think Aunt Karen has had enough peas,” Marci said. “Can I have some?”

“Thank you,” Karen said. She refilled her wineglass and motioned with the bottle to Marci.

“No thanks,” Marci said. “I can’t drink more than one glass per night.”

“Times have changed,” Karen said.

“You try watching a toddler with a buzz working.”

Dinner was over and Jared had taken Madison to give her a bath followed by a video. Karen and Marci began to clean up the dishes; Marci washed and handed the wet

dishes to Karen to dry.

“Madison seems like a great kid,” Karen said. “You and Jared must be doing a good job.”

“She is a great kid. I feel so bad sometimes when I just don’t have the patience for her.”

“So, you’re enjoying this motherhood gig?” Karen wasn’t sure if she wanted to hear the answer. Even if she desired it, and she didn’t think she did, this lifestyle was not within reach at the moment.

“I love it,” Marci said. “I could not have pictured this even five years ago, but it’s the best. I can’t imagine if I would have had to go back to work six weeks after she was born.”

“God, I can’t imagine *not* working,” Karen said.

“But that’s who you are right now. And to be honest, I get jealous of you sometimes.”

“Why?” Karen asked.

“Because you have an identity other than being Mommy. Sometimes I feel as if I don’t know who I am anymore. Virtually every waking moment is spent thinking and worrying and taking care of Madison. And again, I wouldn’t change that but the Marci you knew has been submerged and I’m not all that confident she can be found.”

“Have you thought about going back to work?” She took a plate that Marci handed her, dried it and placed it in the cupboard.

“Yeah, we’ve talked about my going back part-time. It would probably not cover much more than the cost of day care, but I might need it for my own sanity. God, I must sound like I’m whining. I love my life and I know there must be a ton of women out there who wish they could stay at home but can’t. And Jared’s been great about everything. But that’s one of the biggest changes as well.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s as if we’re roommates now, not two people that are married with an active sex life. By the time Madison goes to bed we’re whipped. We don’t have much ‘us’ time anymore. We try to get a babysitter once a month, but that doesn’t always work out.”

“Where does the colander go?” It didn’t make sense to her that she could be jealous of Marci, while at the same time Marci was jealous of her. If a third woman who was a working mother joined them, she would probably be jealous of both Karen and Marci, and they of her. Here it was, she thought, the early years of the twenty-first century and this motherhood issue was still unresolved.

“What about you,” Marci asked. “Any prospects?”

“No,” Karen answered. “I don’t want to date anyone I work with and the other people I’m around the most are cops, and that’s a tougher lifestyle than journalism to get involved with. Besides, a few of them don’t respect me because I’m a woman. They joke with me and say that they’ll be my source if I return the favor. A lot of them are good looking, but they can be so arrogant. And to be honest, I’m too selfish regarding work right now that it wouldn’t be fair to enter a relationship. Not to mention the last guy I dated wanted to marry someone just like Mom.”

The dishes were clean and the two women then sat at the kitchen table, each with a cup of coffee. Jared came in to get a snack and cup of water for Madison. Karen watched as he grabbed what he came for. He was a little too plastic looking for her tastes; his jet-black hair was styled too perfectly, his polo shirt was tucked in to casual dress pants that still looked recently ironed. She preferred her men to look a little more relaxed.

“So,” he said. “Is the male species getting bashed in here?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, honey,” Marci said. “Just because we’re sitting here

talking doesn't mean we're bitching about men. Women do have other subjects to talk about."

He raised his arms in defeat, bowl of dry cereal in one hand and sippy cup in the other, and backed out of the kitchen.

"I did get lucky with him," Marci said after Jared was out of hearing range.

Karen now felt guilty for her earlier judgement of him. "Any thoughts about having another baby?" she asked.

"All the time," Marci said. "I get so torn. For a lot of reasons part of me can't picture having another baby. I can't imagine having to share my time with Madison, I can't expect the next child to be as perfect as Madison and I can't grasp that I could love another one as much as I do Madison. My friends who have more than one kid tell me they felt the same way before the second one came and the capacity is there. Obviously, a lot of people out there have more than one kid and they turn out fine. But really, I don't know if I could go through the whole lack of sleep phase again."

"Jeez, you would never get back to work," Karen said, and hoped the levity she intended came through.

"That's another thing. Jared and I both agreed that as long as we could afford it, I should stay home until the kids enter school. I had a good career going and even if I had another baby tomorrow, that's five years before I could think about getting a serious full-time job. That's a long time to be out of the ad agency world. I don't know if anyone would remember me."

"It sounds like a tough choice," Karen said. She didn't want to sound flippant, but she understood that Marci's concerns were on a level she couldn't grasp.

"Yeah, but we're leaning toward having another. When it comes down to it, I can't imagine what my life would have been like without having my sister to grow up with. I think we owe it to Madison to give her a sibling."

“Well, there’s another area I can’t connect with you on, being an only child and all.”

“By the way, how’s your Mom?”

“Now that you bring her up, she’s got this wild idea in her head that she wants to move to Arizona.”

“Why?” Marci asked.

Before Karen answered she watched her friend glance toward the living room. Even knowing her husband was with Madison, Marci couldn’t seem to keep her mind off of her daughter for very long. Karen had never realized how strong a bond there was between mother and child, which brought her back to Marci’s question.

“She said she’s lonely and wants to live near her sister. Apparently they were best friends growing up.”

“You don’t sound very convinced of that,” Marci said.

“Maybe it’s because Aunt Jean lived so far away while I was young and I didn’t see her very often. It’s just hard for me to envision my mother having a life before I came along.”

“I tell you, it’s hard to remember what my life was like before Madison was born. But I can sympathize with your mother. My sister was one of my best friends when we were kids. I still talk to her two or three times a week.”

“But what about me? Am I being selfish by wanting her to stay here?” Karen got up and put her coffee cup in the dishwasher. She hadn’t expected to get on this subject tonight and she had tried to avoid thinking about it too much after her mother had broken the news to her.

“I don’t know,” Marci said. “All I know is I can’t believe how quickly Madison is growing up. It seems like yesterday we brought her home from the hospital and now she’s putting words together. She’s not my baby anymore.” Marci peeked into the

living room to check on the status of the video. She turned to Karen. "You're welcome to stay, but I'm going to have to get Madison ready for bed in a few minutes."

"I should probably get going," Karen said. She would have liked to stay and chat for awhile more if the subject changed but the theme of parent-child relationships had tired her.

"You know what's sad?" Marci said. "Jared took Madison over to his parents' house last Saturday, partly because they don't see her as often as they should and partly to give me a break for a few hours. After about a half-hour I started to miss having her around the house. I couldn't even enjoy an afternoon alone. At one point I went into her room to clean it up and this incredible wave of sadness came over me. For whatever reason, I got a glimpse of what it would be like when she left home to go to college or whatever."

"That's normal," Karen said, not knowing if it was normal or not.

"That's pathetic, I think," Marci said.

Jared entered the kitchen with Madison following behind. The girl's face broke into a smile when she saw her mother.

"Mommy," she said.

"Hi, baby," Marci said and picked her up. "How was the video? Did you watch Pooh?"

"Yeah."

What an incredible feeling motherhood must be, Karen thought. So much love flowing both ways. She just didn't think it was right for her – at least not right now.

"By the way," Jared said. "As I was rewinding the tape, one of the local news channels was on. You know that executive that shot himself? He died a few hours ago."

"My friend Todd works for that company," Karen said. "At least he used to,

until they laid him off.”

“Well, apparently there are rumors that the SEC is investigating them for accounting irregularities,” Jared said.

“I know the CEO made a boatload of money selling stock a few months ago,” Karen said. She hoped Jared wouldn’t ask her any other questions since that was about all she knew.

“You know,” Marci said. “I just can’t get interested in any of this business gossip anymore. There have been weeks where I don’t even look at the paper once and we hardly watch any TV. We could get sucked into a war and chances are I wouldn’t know.”

Karen said her good-byes to Jared and Madison. The latter, after some prodding from Marci, gave Karen an open-mouthed kiss. Marci walked Karen to the door.

“By the way,” Karen said. “I’ve meant to tell you this all evening. You look great.”

“For being a mom, you mean?”

“Because you’re a mom, I think.”

Karen spent the entire drive home thinking about motherhood and babies. Was she willing to give up her chances of having a baby because of her job? Even if she had a regular, Monday through Friday day job, would she want to have a baby? Right now she would have to say no. Not that she had to decide tonight, but one of these years soon the decision would be made for her. She was thirty-three and hadn’t had more than five dates with a guy in more than a year, with no new prospects on her radar screen. So even if she met her future husband tomorrow, the timeline for having a

planned baby was four or five years down the road.

The message light was flashing on her answering machine. She listened to the message from her editor, Alan, that she should call him as soon as she got back in. Something must have happened involving The Avenger.

“Hey, Alan, what’s happening?”

“We’ve got a developing situation.”

“Is it The Avenger?” She knew she sounded like a six-year-old on Christmas morning but she didn’t care.

“No. There’s a standoff between the police and some guy. Apparently he broke into a house and is holding a woman who lives there hostage.”

“Oh.” She couldn’t stop the disappointment from entering her voice. “It’s Saturday night, Alan. I’ve got a headache and I really need to sleep.”

“Did your dog eat your homework, too?”

“What?”

“I wouldn’t be calling if we didn’t need you,” he said. “And if it *was* The Avenger, I have a feeling you would have already left to come here.”

“OK,” she said, properly chastised. “What’s the address?”

It had reached the point where Karen was bored by stories other than those regaling The Avenger’s latest exploits. One month ago a hostage situation would have made her adrenaline pump, but now she had to stifle a yawn. She hoped that she wasn’t ignoring her beat – and really, she couldn’t, what with the police scanner being situated five feet from her desk – but every time she heard the staccato voice come across the static of the scanner she hoped for a new Avenger story, and was disappointed when it wasn’t. At times she worried about her life after The Avenger saga concluded. Could she possibly go back to mundane police reporting? Maybe she would think about changing beats. She was torn between wanting The Avenger to

continue forever and needing to discover now who he was. The quicker she uncovered the secret identity – and she had convinced herself that only she could make that discovery – the quicker she would have to make a decision. There were way too many decisions she was thinking about today. Her imaginary headache had started to become real.

She parked as close as the police would let her and then wormed her way through the crowd of curiosity seekers. Karen was constantly amazed at the number of people who hung around crime scenes. Maybe the gawkers felt like they were on a television show, because the majority of them were near one of the four TV crews that were set up. Karen tried to see who from the police department was in charge, hoping it was Lieutenant Leary, who usually provided her with better access and, more importantly, better quotes than other police officials. One disadvantage to being somewhat short was that it was hard to find someone in a crowd, but Karen did locate the man in charge, and it was indeed Leary. The effects of the wine and the disappointment of this not being an Avenger story had both worn off. She waited until Leary had finished talking to a TV reporter and then sidled up to him.

“Evening, Lieutenant.”

“Hello, Karen. What brings you out on a night like this?”

She knew the situation couldn’t be that bad if he was joking with her, since no matter how much he enjoyed talking with the media, the job at hand always came first. He wasn’t that old – maybe early forties – but his hair already had a distinguished silver glint.

“So what’s going on?” she asked as she opened her notebook.

“I assume you know that a man broke into the house and is holding a woman

hostage. We've determined that he is an ex-boyfriend of the woman. Apparently he wanted to be more serious with her than she was with him. The woman's relatives told us that they had considered him a harmless loser. Let's hope he's as harmless as they think."

"Have you been in contact with the guy?"

"Yes, about a half-hour ago we were able to get through to him on the telephone. We think he's more scared than dangerous. He's realized he got himself into something he hadn't thought through the ramifications of."

"So you think you can get the woman out of the house safely?"

"I think we'll get both of them out safely," Leary answered.

A gunshot exploded the calm and about twenty police officers and FBI agents dropped into a defensive position, rifles and pistols at the ready. Karen understood that this was a development that the police had not anticipated, and she looked for something to hide behind. She watched as Lieutenant Leary and a few others started to bark commands and then she was forced to back up, away from the line of police. Karen thought it looked as if a group of men were about to swarm the house when the door opened and a woman stumbled out. Leary shouted something that Karen couldn't make out as a couple of the woman's friends or relatives broke through and ran to her. A couple of minutes later a gurney came out of the house with the apparently dead man covered with a blanket. Whether it was the wine she had with dinner or the realization that she had never been this close to a recently dead body, Karen felt as if she were going to be sick.

"Well, that's one less freak to worry about," Detective Simmons said.

Karen stared at the detective, amazed at his reaction. Simmons was someone Karen had had to deal with over the past few months and she considered it a necessary evil of her job. She tried to swallow down the bile that hung in her mouth and

composed herself as best she could. Simmons looked like her vision of the prototypical cop: tall, thinning hair, bushy mustache, slightly paunchy. Karen knew that Simmons had a problem with females and that he was one of those policemen who didn't respect her as a serious journalist.

"He was a human being," Karen said as disdainfully as she could manage. "He obviously had some issues but you can't be happy that somebody is dead."

"I'm happy none of us had to be put in danger to get that woman safely out of the house," he said.

They watched as the body was loaded onto an ambulance and driven away. Karen looked for Leary so she could get a statement, but he was huddled with a group of men on the other side of the tape strung to keep pedestrians away. That was where the end of her story was waiting, as she needed a couple of quotes on what happened.

"Can you take me over there?" Karen asked Simmons.

"What's it worth to you?" he asked.

"Jerk," she muttered. She started to move toward the tape, hoping to get Leary's attention.

"Hey," Simmons said to her. "Play nice with me. You never know what kind of leads I can give you about The Avenger."

"What do you know?" Damn, she thought, he knew where to put the hook.

"I'm not saying I know anything, but we're trying to figure out who he is too, you know. And we have a little more experience playing detective than you do." His smile made Karen shudder. "All I'm saying is it wouldn't hurt to be a little more friendly to me."

Karen knew what he meant by being 'more friendly.' He had hit on her almost every time she saw him.

"I think we have different ideas of what friendly is," she said.

Simmons shrugged. He started to turn away from her and Karen was about to try again to get Leary's attention.

"I guess us being friends depends on how much you want The Avenger," he said. "So go back to the newspaper and think about it. How bad do you want it?"

She finally caught Leary's eye and she tried to get Simmons's image out of her mind.

Karen entered the newsroom to write her story. She had about 25 minutes to get it filed, due to the different deadlines on Saturday nights. The size of the Sunday paper forced the presses to run earlier than on other days. It wasn't a pleasant story to write because she didn't want to insinuate that the police had underestimated the situation. Detective Simmons aside, the police were not as callous about somebody's death as the public might gather, even someone who was threatening the life of an innocent victim. She finished the story and sent it to the copy desk. As she waited to find out if there were any questions, she noticed her mail slot had something in it. She looked at the unadorned business-size envelope but there was no indication as to whom it was from. Karen opened the letter but before she could read it, Alan stopped at her desk.

"Thanks for coming in tonight," he said.

"No problem. Sorry I gave you a hard time. It is my job, after all."

"Yeah, it is. But it still can't be easy to come in on a Saturday night."

"You've been married too long, Alan. You forget that not every night is a party." It bothered her that everybody that had kids assumed that single people didn't know anything: they didn't know what tired was, they didn't know what responsibility was, all they did was go out and have fun. She knew Alan was only joking with her but the truth of his view was hidden behind the joke. "Besides, I'm not that young

anymore.”

“That guy killing himself must have been rough to see. Not to sound rude, but you look worn out.”

“I’m not really tired, I just feel like I’ve seen enough of today.” Karen glanced at the letter. “Oh my god.”

“What is it?” Alan asked.

“It’s a letter from The Avenger.”

To my good friend Karen,

It is obvious that you are the chosen one at your workplace to follow my so-called “career.” I feel honored that a journalist with your pedigree has been assigned to me. I have to be honest with you; the media attention is more than I expected. How am I supposed to do my job if I have to look over my shoulder to make sure no one is watching? My hope is that we develop a symbiotic relationship; I don’t want you to become a parasite. Do you want to know who I am? I’m sure it’s quite the conundrum, seeing as how I sell papers. By discovering my identity you would kill the goose that laid the golden egg. Identity is a tricky subject, is it not? But more than most, I understand the thrill of the chase. Maybe someday you and I can sit down over a drink and look back on this time as the good old days. Good luck.

Karen re-read the letter two more times, searching for a clue that she knew probably wasn’t there. She then handed it to Alan.

“Don’t get too caught up in it,” he said after reading it. “He’s just having some fun with you.”

“Too late,” she said, more to herself than to her boss. “I’ve been snagged.”

7

Todd sat at the bar and nursed his second beer of the afternoon. He tried to forget that it was still daylight outside and that he should have better things to do than spend his time waiting for some loser to come in and open his mouth. This was the third time in the past two weeks that Todd had come here and the bartender had acknowledged him with a quick nod, which Todd took as a sign of recognition. Todd was using this bar in an act of reconnaissance; a way to come across scum who committed crimes that needed avenging. He knew it was a naïve way of thinking, but a dingy bar such as this in a part of the city that was less than prosperous might reap the sort of reward Todd was searching for. Plus, it was near the unemployment office, so at least the first time he had an excuse to come here. The thrill of the cigarette dump had quickly worn off and Todd had decided that his career as The Avenger needed to take the next step forward. Most of his deeds had been fun copy for the media but were generally simple. If he wanted to keep doing this, both The Avenger and the media needed an edgier commitment on his part. So he had started to come here, hoping that familiarity might breed the confidence of a two-bit hood. He knew that his mind was thinking like a detective novel and that real life was much more complicated, but he

couldn't help but think that he was smarter than those he was seeking.

Nothing about the place, from the lack of stools at the bar to the jukebox that thought it was 1958 to the one waitress who could be any age from 30 to 60 – and Todd would have felt sorry for her at either end of that spectrum – made a person feel particularly welcome. Maybe that was the reason the clientele tended toward the rougher side. A person didn't go there to be social; they went to drink. And drink was on the mind of the gentleman who asked for a beer as he stepped up to the bar right next to Todd. So close, in fact, that he brushed Todd, who hit his teeth with the rim of his bottle while taking a sip.

"Damn," he said as he slammed his bottle on the wood surface of the bar. He looked at the man, who held in his hand a wad of bills of a size not normally seen in an establishment such as this.

"Sorry, bud," the man said. "Lemmee tell you what, I'll buy you another beer to make up for it. And what the hell," he said, turning to the bartender, "why don't you add a shot on top of it?"

"A beer would be great," Todd said. "No need for the shot."

"Don't worry about it," the man said, apparently misinterpreting Todd's lack of desire for the liquor. "Money ain't no object."

"First time for everything," the bartender said. He slid a bottle over to Todd, who had learned on his first visit here that, like a strip club, you didn't get your beer in a glass, a bottle was much safer. "What happened, Eddie? Your horse finally come in?"

"Junior, I'm in too good a mood to let you bug me today." Eddie drank his beer in one long motion and then wiped his sleeve across his mouth. "Gimmee another, and I'll do a shot, too. And in answer to your question, let's just say that work has been picking up lately."

Todd's attention was now strictly focused on Eddie. This could be the loser he

had been searching for, the one who was ready to brag about a job. He waited until Junior poured some house whiskey into a couple of shot glasses before he spoke to his new friend.

“Salud,” Todd said, raising his glass toward Eddie before downing the liquor. He tried not to react too strongly as the whiskey burned its way down his throat. This was why he normally stuck to beer. “So what kinda work do you do?” Todd asked.

“I got my hand in a few different things,” Eddie replied. His tone was shorter than his previous jocularity.

“I hear ya,” Todd said. He turned back to his beer. “It’s hard to find anything good that lasts.”

Todd wanted to question him further but he believed he would raise some alarms if he delved too deep, too quickly. His throat was still raw from the whiskey and he worried that three beers and a shot would dull his senses enough to screw up his plans. A Bobby Darin song bored its way into his consciousness and Todd still had a hard time reconciling the man who sang *Splish, Splash* and *Mack the Knife* as the same artist. He tried to gauge Eddie out of the corner of his eye: mid- to late-twenties, cheesy moustache, faded Harley-Davidson T-shirt untucked over black jeans. A glance to the floor showed motorcycle boots but Eddie carried no helmet. Nothing out of the ordinary, but was that not what most people were? Todd held the belief that the best and worst of what life had to offer were to be found in the ordinary. And most of your common criminals – if you dug beneath the layer of distrust that a lack of money enveloped them with – looked normal.

Todd took another sip of his beer and thought through his next move. He intuitively knew that Eddie was involved in something illegal and Todd hoped that whatever it was would be Avenger-worthy. Eddie announced his intention of going to the bathroom and Todd waited until he was out of sight before catching the bartender’s

attention.

“Hey, Junior,” he said and quickly saw that he was not on friendly enough terms with the man to use his name. The bartender had a wandering eye that Todd found disconcerting now that he was staring straight at him. He was a good head taller than Todd; completely bald with both arms filled with tattoos, most likely from a tour in the military and not from following the latest fad. Junior was the wrong name for a man this intimidating, Todd thought. The man grabbed Todd’s bottle and started to get him another before Todd corrected him.

“Let me settle up,” he said. Todd took out his wallet and threw a twenty-dollar bill on the bar. “So what’s the story with Eddie?”

“Eddie ain’t got no story as far as I know,” Junior said. “It’s not my job to know his story.”

“Is he ever looking for help?” Todd asked. He flashed in front of Junior his unemployment check stub. “This don’t last forever.”

“I told you. I don’t get involved in what my customers do.” He tossed Todd’s change on the bar.

Todd pushed the entire amount toward Junior for a tip. “Well,” he said. “If you happen to hear him say anything, just let him know I may be interested.”

“Eddie’s a punk who goes a month without paying his tab,” Junior said. “He just got lucky with something.”

“Sometimes luck runs in streaks,” Todd said, and turned to go. He almost bumped into the returning Eddie. “Thanks for the drink,” he said, and left the bar.

The daylight temporarily blinded him when he opened the heavy door leading to the street. It was the same feeling he got after seeing a matinee movie, the sense of being out of sorts, seeing sunshine when normally he would come out of a place like this after dark. He hoped that he hadn’t sounded too much like an idiot back at the bar.

He did not doubt that he was out of his element; he didn't know how people like Junior and Eddie talked, thought or acted. Todd was second-guessing everything now. He didn't know what he would do if he stopped back and Eddie took him up on his offer. What criminal skills did Todd have? None, that he was aware of, excepting the nerve to do something. And how would The Avenger catch Eddie doing something if Todd was there? Not to mention the possibility that Eddie was a normal, law-abiding citizen who came into his cash legally. He told himself that he wouldn't come back for at least a week so he wouldn't appear too conspicuous.

Two days later he was back at the bar. Being unemployed made it harder to wait for a full week to pass. Todd stood near one end of the bar, leaning on the wood and holding his bottle of beer while watching the television. A couple of regulars stood near him, commenting on the state of the world through their eyes. Both men wore jackets that made Todd believe they spent a lot of time working outdoors. Other than a nod when he walked in, Junior had not acknowledged Todd. He brought him a bottle of beer but made no indication that he had spoken with Eddie, who, coincidentally enough was at the other end of the bar. Todd held himself in check, figuring he might scare Eddie off if he appeared too anxious.

"Well I think he should be locked up," one of the men next to Todd said.

"I wish there were more out there like him," said the other. "If I was a few years younger I would track The Avenger down and offer my services."

"If you were a few years younger you would be one of the guys The Avenger was chasing," the first man said and laughed. Todd saw that he was missing a couple of teeth. "Or don't you remember that I bailed you out more than once?"

Todd sipped his beer and listened. This was the first time he had overheard

people talking about The Avenger and he felt a pride that he hoped didn't show. It was like a validation of The Avenger's existence. Sure, his exploits had been all over the media, but now everyday average people were discussing him.

"I think he's doing a good thing," Todd said.

The two men looked at him as if they realized for the first time that he was there, and they didn't exactly look pleased by that fact.

"He doesn't have a chance," the first guy said.

"What do you mean?" Todd asked

"It's like boiling the ocean, there's just too much shit out there for anyone to make a difference."

"Sometimes you just gotta try," Todd said, more to himself than in direct answer.

He raised his empty bottle to get Junior's attention for a refill and then walked to the bathroom. As he stood in front of the urinal he thought of the guy's comment. Was what he doing making any difference in the grand scheme of things? He did believe his earlier statement; he did have to try. Otherwise, too many people got away with too many things. He zipped, washed his hands and pushed the door open just as Eddie was approaching.

"Hey, Eddie," Todd said. He could tell right away that Eddie didn't recognize him. "We met here two days ago. Remember, you bumped into me and then bought me a beer and a shot?"

"Christ, was that only a couple of days ago? Seems like a month."

He didn't say anything else; he simply walked past Todd and into the bathroom. Either Junior had not given him the message yet or Eddie had ignored it. Todd went back and drank his beer in silence while watching one of the televisions that Junior had positioned at either end of the bar. The local news was on and the story was about a

man who was released on bail after being accused of trying to set an apartment house on fire because they wouldn't let him live there. Todd thought he remembered the story from reading the paper and he told himself to read the article when he got home. An idea had already begun to form.

Todd and Karen were at Matt's house for the first cookout of the year. In the latter days of April the weather was warm enough to stand in front of the gas grill long enough to cook, although they would eat inside. They had no high expectations for Matt's culinary skills but cooking grilled chicken slathered in BBQ sauce, with sides of rice and tossed salad did not tax anyone's ability. And if worse came to worse, a couple of bottles of beer apiece would help the food go down easier.

"Hey Karen, I've got a great idea."

"What's that?"

"If you ever discover who The Avenger is you should write a book about him."

"A book?"

"Yeah. I'm sure it would be easy to find an interested publisher. The guy is in the headlines, people are curious and, if you crack this, you would probably know more than anyone about The Avenger's story. And you're a writer."

Todd was enjoying having some fun at Karen's expense. He knew how important The Avenger was to her and he couldn't help prodding her when the opportunity arose. He walked over to Matt's stereo system to put in a new CD.

"Did I tell you that The Avenger sent me a letter?"

"No," Todd said. He tried his best to sound surprised, although he had thought it a stroke of genius on his part. "What did he have to say?"

“It was interesting. It started out . . .”

“What was interesting,” Matt said, interrupting her. He had come in after flipping the chicken.

“The letter from The Avenger.”

“Oh, yeah. I heard about that. It was the talk of the newsroom.”

“I’ll let you read it if you’re nice.”

When has he ever been anything but nice to you, Todd thought. He wanted Karen to get on with her description of the letter. It would be interesting to see how she interpreted it.

“Anyway,” she continued. “He wrote about something that’s been on my mind lately; I want to discover who he is but do I want it all to end? It’s been great for my career to cover him. He also wrote something about hoping I wouldn’t become a parasite and that maybe we could have drinks after it’s all over. I don’t think that would ever happen.”

“Why not?” Todd asked. He really was curious as to how she thought.

“However it ends, I don’t think The Avenger will be in a situation to reveal his identity and enjoy any sort of retirement. Matt, you’re not burning our dinner, are you?”

Matt rushed back outside as Todd thought about Karen’s last comment. How would it end? He was so concerned with what The Avenger would do next that he tried not to visualize a month, much less a year or two, down the road. Maybe it was true that he wouldn’t be able to just stop and enjoy his post-Avenger life, at least not if his identity ever became publicly known. For some reason he had always imagined Karen finding out, but not necessarily the rest of the world.

“So what about the book?” he asked. He did not want to think about the future right now.

"I'm not sure I'm author material."

"C'mon. If you don't do it you know someone else will, so why not take advantage? As a matter of fact, you should probably work on finding an agent now so everything is in place when you're ready."

"If you're all hot for this then why don't you write the book?" she said.

"I'm not sure my perspective would be the same as yours."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you would be much more objective than I would." At least Todd wasn't lying about that point. Anyone in the world would be more objective than he would be. "What I mean is, so many people like myself are fans that it wouldn't be a well-rounded look at the big picture."

"Tell you what," Karen said to end the subject. "When the time comes, I'll think about it."

"Dinner is ready," Matt announced from the kitchen.

Todd sat down at the kitchen table. He wondered when his brother had bought matching place settings, and then realized that they were from a set their parents had owned. Some relative must have stored them until Matt was in need. He wondered how many items from their old house survived over the years and were still in the family somewhere. He tried to call up what had happened in the days and weeks following the accident and per normal, his usually sharp memory failed him. All he could remember was being shuttled from house to house for a few days at a time until Uncle Jim and Aunt Janet took them in for good. Not a time of his life that Todd remembered fondly. His aunt and uncle were good people, and they tried their best, but to have your parents ripped from you – no matter what age you were – did not help the maturing process go smoothly. It was at this point that he and Matt had started to grow apart. It was inevitable, Todd thought, two boys entering adolescence could not always be expected

to bond together in the face of a crisis. Matt withdrew into his fantasy world and Todd felt an anger he could not get rid of for years. And being twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old, how could you talk to your brother about your feelings? He understood the reasoning behind what he considered to be Matt's denial of events but it didn't make it easier to accept. Todd's reaction to most bad news was to lash out. He thought of himself as the cornered animal, dangerous when his back was against the wall. At the same time he thought of Matt as a turtle, bringing his extremities in under his shell for protection. Who knew which way was better? Ultimately, a person did what a person had to do to survive. The knocking of Karen's fist against his head interrupted his reverie.

"Hello? Anybody home?"

"I take it I was daydreaming?" Todd said.

"Either that or you were intentionally ignoring us," Karen said.

"What was the topic of conversation?"

"What you were now doing with your life other than sleeping your days away."

"I guess I was ignoring you then," Todd said. He reached to stab a piece of chicken from the platter.

"Seriously," she said as they began to eat. "What are you going to do?"

"The only plans I have for right now are to enjoy the first half of the summer, compliments of my severance package."

"What did you think of your former CFO's suicide?" Matt asked.

"It could be the tip of the iceberg," Todd answered. "I doubt we'll ever know everything that occurred with that company. But it's obviously a clue that something illegal was going on."

"It must be pretty bad if you're willing to kill yourself," Karen said.

Todd had to use a knife to cut through the chicken. "You know," he said to

Matt, "it's not necessary to cook every drop of juice out of the chicken." He turned his attention back to Karen. "I guess some people would rather not have to see their crimes aired in public."

"Suicide still seems a little drastic to me."

"We don't know how bad it was. Maybe death was preferable to spending thirty years in jail."

After they finished dinner and cleaned up Karen announced that she needed to get going. She had a book at home on the psychology of vigilantes that she was struggling to get through, one that she thought would help her understanding of The Avenger, which made Todd wonder if he was destined to be a case study for graduate psych majors.

"Thanks for dinner," Karen told Matt. She gave him a brief hug and Todd noticed she backed away before Matt had a chance to wrap his arms around her.

"Todd, I'll be seeing you later." She gave him a hug and he leaned in to give her a quick kiss on the lips. He saw the surprise in her eyes but she recovered nicely.

The door closed behind her and Todd counted to three before Matt was all over him.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

"What?" Todd asked, playing dumb.

"That kiss you gave Karen."

"I was just being friendly," Todd said. "Why, did it bother you?"

"Yes. You know how I feel about her."

"Then do something about it," Todd yelled. "Get off your ass and do something about it." He looked at his brother, who stood, apparently unable to comment further. Todd grabbed his jacket and started toward the door. He felt he had to push his brother more, so he turned back to face him. "Matt, do me a favor and stop being so pathetic

about Karen. To put it in baseball terms, either step up to the plate or spend the rest of your life on the bench.”

Todd sat in his car and felt like a cop on a stakeout, complete with travel mug of coffee and pre-packaged sandwich from a convenience store. He had been parked for an hour, waiting for the man to come home. He opened the newspaper for the tenth time since he had been here, looking again at the mug shot and listed address. He was surprised the man had been released on bail, considering he was caught in the act of setting the fire at the apartment building. Todd took a sip and then focused his attention on the car that had just parked on the side of the road in front of the building he was scoping out. The man from the paper got out and entered the house. After a minute Todd saw a light go on in one of the upstairs rooms. Todd saw from the dashboard clock that it was a few minutes after midnight, so he was hoping the man would go to sleep soon.

Twenty minutes later the light went out. Todd waited another minute and then looked around him. The street was empty. Luckily it was a side street that probably received no traffic other than from residents. He opened his door and grabbed the can of gasoline he had brought along. He slowly approached the car and quietly opened the driver-side door. He took another look around before pouring some gasoline on the front seat. Todd then took the can back to his car and started his engine. He waited for a woman to drive past and pull into a driveway a ways down the street and then waited some more for her to enter the house. When he felt safe, Todd went back to the other car, impaled an Avenger business card on the antenna and lit a match, which he tossed on the seat. He had to back up quickly to avoid the whoosh of flames. He ran to his car and drove away, stopping at a convenience store to call 911 to alert them to the fire.

Time to take the next step, Todd thought. Time to see what The Avenger was capable of doing. He walked into Junior's bar for the first time in more than a week. He hadn't wanted to seem too anal about coming back to see if Junior had passed along his message to Eddie. A table of four workers that Todd guessed were from the tool and die shop down the road were either eating a late lunch or had already knocked off for the day. Three other people stood at the bar this afternoon. Todd watched them for a minute as they leaned on the edge and cupped their bottles in both hands, bent as if the world had beaten them down. They were older than Todd but he guessed they were short of what he would have thought of as retirement age. He wondered how their lives had progressed in order to lead them to be here at this moment. He knew that he hadn't been in any sort of hurry to look for a job, but he was only a month into his severance – he had time. But if he had no severance, how easy would it be to just give up and stop trying? How many years of rejection would it take until he was a regular at a place such as this? It was easy to think he was better than these men but Todd was sure they hadn't expected their lives to turn out as they had. He didn't think anyone dreamed of being poor and unemployed. Of course he was assuming that the men were down on their luck, and the way he looked today – unshaven and generally slovenly – they might think the same of him.

Junior eventually made his way to where Todd stood and took the order for a beer. The bartender gave Todd no sign of recognition or any indication that he had even delivered the message to Eddie, much less received a response. It took Todd about ten minutes to drink the beer and he was trying to decide if he wanted to drink another when Junior walked past and slid a piece of paper toward him. Todd picked the scrap up and read a phone number. That was it; no name, just seven numbers.

"I do not like to get involved in the private lives of my customers," Junior said. He didn't look at Todd; instead he washed a couple of glasses in the sink under the bar. "So do what you gotta do and keep me out of it."

Todd said his thanks, left a five-dollar bill on the bar and walked over to the pay phone that was located near the bathrooms. He punched in the number written on the paper and waited through four rings before someone answered.

"Yeah?"

"Is this Eddie?"

"Maybe. Who's this?"

"Junior gave me your number. I'm the guy from the bar. We've bumped into each other a couple times recently."

Todd realized that he had absolutely no clue what he was doing or what he should say. He hoped that it wasn't too obvious to Eddie.

"Yeah, I remember now. Whaddya want?"

"I thought maybe you had some work I could help you with."

"I don't remember telling you what I did for a living," Eddie said.

"You didn't," Todd agreed. "I just thought that, you know, whatever it was there might be enough work for two."

"I don't know you from Adam."

"You're right." Todd tried to think of what he could say next. "Do you want to meet somewhere and talk?"

A recorded message interrupted and asked for additional money if the call was to continue. Todd reached into his pocket but had no more change.

"What do you say?" Todd asked, "I'm gonna get cut off here in a second."

It took Eddie a couple of seconds to answer. "Meet me in front of the bar in a half-hour," he said, and then hung up.

Todd's heart was racing as he replaced the receiver. He went into the men's room to wash off his face and try to relax. He started at his reflection in the mirror. "This could be it," he told himself. It was a long way from producing revenue reports, but he needed, rather, The Avenger needed to test himself. He thought about having another beer to pass the time but decided against it. No use dulling the senses when he didn't know what sort of situation he would soon find himself in.

Todd stood with his back against a light post when an old Chevy coupe pulled in front of the bar. Eddie got out of the car and leaned on the open door, surveying the area. He saw Todd and gave a quick nod and waited. Todd walked over and couldn't help but notice the dents and rust that covered a fair share of the car's body.

"Do you want to get a drink?" Todd asked.

"I ain't going in there," Eddie said and motioned with his head toward the bar. "I owe Junior money." He lit a cigarette and threw the match on the pavement. "Get in," he said.

Todd sat in the passenger seat after moving a couple of biker magazines out of the way. The car stunk of cigarettes and the floor by Todd's feet was filled with empty fast food containers. A heavy metal tape of a band Todd didn't recognize played loud enough to make the speakers throb. Todd felt like he was back in high school. Eddie pulled into the street and started driving. They were entering a part of the city that Todd was unfamiliar with, notwithstanding the stories he read in the paper about shootings and drug busts. Was this really a world he wanted to get involved in? Eddie was a nervous driver, constantly looking in his rear view mirror and shifting in his seat. Todd had to quell his anger when Eddie threw the cigarette butt out his window. He grew more uncomfortable after a few minutes, mainly because Eddie hadn't said a word. He

decided to break the silence.

“Where are we going?”

Eddie didn't answer at first; instead he lit another cigarette and took a long drag and then released the smoke through his nose.

“Answer me a question,” Eddie finally said. “Who the fuck are you?”

“What do you mean?” Todd asked. He became more nervous. What the hell was he doing here? He knew he was so out of his element. “I thought we were going to talk about doing some work?”

“Doing some work,” Eddie repeated in a tone that Todd thought condescending. “What could someone like you possibly help me with?”

Todd didn't answer because he didn't know if the question was rhetorical or not. He had had no clue how this meeting would turn out but it didn't look promising so far. The confidence he felt as The Avenger was not present in the car. He wanted to turn back the clock and convince himself that he could be satisfied with fun little deeds such as dumping cigarette butts on someone's lawn. Where did he get the idea that he could infiltrate this world?

“Let me tell you what I think,” Eddie said. “I think you're too stupid to be a cop.”

“I'm not a cop,” Todd said defensively.

“Then you've either been sent to follow me around or you think I'm some kinda easy mark.”

“Relax, Eddie. I'm just looking for a little action.”

He was so not in control right now. If only Matt – who believed that Todd could handle himself in any situation – could see him now. Eddie slowed to a stop at a red light. Todd could tell he was thinking things through and hoped whatever answer Eddie came up with would be safe.

"Your don't dress like me, you don't talk like me. This ain't your world. What experience do you got?" Eddie asked.

"Not much," Todd truthfully answered. "I'm good with numbers and I can handle myself in a fight." What was he supposed to say?

"In other words, you've never done any jobs before?"

"Not really. I got laid-off a little while ago and I need some cash."

The light had turned green while Eddie was pondering the situation. A car behind them honked its horn and Eddie flipped off the driver as he accelerated. That seemed to set Eddie on edge and he looked at Todd for a second before reaching toward the glove compartment. He opened it and pulled out a small pistol before Todd could react. He waved it at Todd while keeping one eye on the road before he pulled into a dead-end alley.

"Get out of the car," Eddie yelled. "Get out of the fuckin' car."

"Take it easy." He wondered if Eddie was high on something, now that he could see that the man's crazed eyes were bloodshot and flitting back and forth, not really focused on any one thing.

"Open the fuckin' door and get out of the car. I'm not gonna say it again."

Todd didn't see that he had much of a choice. He didn't want to struggle with Eddie especially considering that he had never been this close to a gun before. He pulled the door handle and half-rolled, half-jumped out of the car. Eddie was on him almost immediately and slammed Todd into the side of a building. Todd knew his knee was hurt but he couldn't think about that because the next thing he saw was the butt end of Eddie's gun right before it smashed into his temple.

Todd felt as if he had been roasted in aluminum foil. He tried to focus but the

best he could do was pick some asphalt grit from his arm. He couldn't remember where he was or why he would be there anyway. He sat up and leaned against a wall that he soon realized was part of an alleyway. He slowly reached up to touch his head and felt a scab, so obviously he had been here long enough for whatever cuts he had to dry. Although he was in a shaded area he could tell the sun was shining, a fact that was reinforced when he felt blinded as he stumbled onto the street and crumpled to the pavement because of a sharp pain in his right knee. Some of the events that led him here came back to him, but he didn't know how he had gone from jumping out of Eddie's car to waking in the alley.

He instinctively reached for his wallet and panicked when it wasn't there. He turned back to the alley and saw it lying on the ground. He picked it up and saw that his money had been taken. Another wave of panic set in when he remembered that he had a few of The Avenger's business cards tucked away in one of the pockets. He lifted the flap and breathed a sigh of relief to see the cards still there, until he counted them. There were five, but he couldn't swear how many should have been there. He prayed that whoever took his money – most likely Eddie – would have been satisfied with the cash. He reached into a pocket and felt the twenty-dollar bill he had put in there this morning. It would be enough to get a cab ride home. There was no way he could call anyone he knew to come get him, how could he explain what had happened?

He ignored the looks he received when he entered a store to break the twenty so he could get change to call a taxi. As he waited for his ride to show, he took inventory of himself and decided that other than his injured knee all he had were a few cuts and a massive headache. What a disaster this day had turned out to be. He briefly considered going to the police and filing a complaint against Eddie, but then he remembered that he wasn't sure Eddie had seen – or even taken – one of The Avenger business cards. Better to bide his time, regroup and think. The hero wasn't supposed to lose, was he?

Thor would occasionally get whipped but he would come right back and save the day. Todd felt as if his butt had been kicked and the world was going to survive just fine without his involvement.

The phone roused Todd from what was becoming his habitual afternoon nap. The sleep had made him logy and it took him a few rings to realize what the noise was. If he had been more alert he likely would not have answered, but it was a reaction that made him reach for the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Todd, it’s George, from what used to be work.”

“George. How are you?” Todd shook his head to try and clear his brain. He must have been in a deep sleep.

“I’m surviving. Listen, the reason I’m calling is that a bunch of us are trying to put together a class-action lawsuit and I wanted to know if you were interested in joining.”

“A lawsuit? What are you suing for?”

“Didn’t you hear? Our grand old company is supposed to file for bankruptcy today, and if that happens they’ll soon be cutting off our severance packages. Not to mention our health insurance.”

Todd couldn’t speak for a moment. He knew he had been out of touch with a lot of what had been happening in the world but this news was astounding.

“When did you hear this?” Todd asked.

“It’s all over the Internet and on those financial channels. Haven’t you been paying attention?”

“I knew the stock was still dropping,” Todd said. The truth was, he hadn’t paid

much attention the last week or two. He barely glanced at the sports section anymore, much less the business news. "If they file for bankruptcy, that would mean we would lose everything in our 401(k)s."

"I see this is beginning to sink in," George said. "But I'm not worried about retirement, I'm wondering how I'm going to pay the mortgage if they stop our severance payments."

"Can they do that?"

"Apparently they'll try to consider our severances existing debt, which is what the bankruptcy filing is meant to get rid of."

"Has the company said this?" Todd asked.

"Come on, Todd. We both know a lot of people who still work there. I've made some calls. I'm surprised you're not more aware of this. You were the one who usually learned this type of thing before I did."

"I guess I've been a little preoccupied with other things."

Todd could hear voices in the background asking George for something, and then a squeal.

"Sorry, the baby was acting up. Well, can we count you in?"

"You bet your ass," Todd said. "Now Susan Loserio and her \$266 million stock sale really pisses me off. She must have known what was coming."

"I'm sure she'll walk away with not even a slap on the wrist," George said. "Did you know her daughter was getting married next month? You should marry into that family."

"I wouldn't mind inheriting a couple of hundred million. I bet that'll be one huge reception."

"I hear it's going to be at Chestnut Hills Country Club. I think the Loserios are members."

“I know they are,” Todd said. “I used to do her budget and her membership dues were something the company paid for.”

“Amazing. The ones that don’t need it are the ones who get the perks. Anyway, I’ll give you a call when we have more concrete plans for the lawsuit. I think a couple of people are trying to post a Web site, which would keep all of us up-to-date. See ya.”

Todd hung up and sat on the couch holding the phone. How could someone be responsible for a company that filed for bankruptcy yet walk away with hundreds of millions of dollars? Todd the ex-employee was pissed off. Todd The Avenger was wondering what could be done to help rectify the situation. The question of the day was how could The Avenger touch someone like Susan Loserio? It wasn’t as if he could walk up to her and steal her money. He couldn’t get her fired. And besides, even if she was fired she would probably get one of those ‘golden parachute’ deals which would give her untold millions more to walk away. What weaknesses did Susan Loserio have that could be exploited? He found it funny that his thought process had immediately coalesced on Loserio, ignoring anybody else at the company who may have profited or helped cause the bankruptcy alongside her. Well, he rationalized; it wasn’t feasible to go after twenty people. Maybe he couldn’t handle a punk like Eddie, but perhaps The Avenger could visit Susan Loserio. Not that he was feeling too confident in that guise. He needed time to think, time to come up with a plan; and lucky for him, time was something he had plenty of.

8

Matt looked outside and it was as if the whole world had turned green overnight. Leaves that had recently been buds splayed open to show off how beautiful nature could be when it was fresh. A person's mood would have to improve simply by noticing, Matt thought. The drastic change of seasons was one of the few benefits to living this far north. The snow-filled winters dragged on for too many months, but when spring hit with its full force – as it was doing today – then surviving through January, February and March almost seemed worth it. He doubted that those who lived in warmer climes could appreciate a day such as today if it was not that different from yesterday or the day before that. Of course, those same people probably considered him an idiot for living somewhere where you couldn't be outside for a third of the year. He wanted to lie in the soft grass that was still a few months away from the summer burn that occurred no matter how much he watered. Tulips and daffodils bloomed in many of his neighbors' yards, which Matt always took as a sign of both renewal and hope. If something can sleep in the frozen earth for months and then suddenly spring to life, then the rest of the world could be filled with such possibilities. What was stopping him from his own rebirth?

It was about 6:30, a relatively quiet time of night for the newsroom. The dayside staff had mostly left, including almost everyone from Features and Business, and the anxiety of deadline was still a few hours away.

Charley MacBride raised his hands and called for everyone's attention. It wasn't often that the copy desk chief spoke to an assembled group so Matt knew the announcement must be important. This wasn't one of those monthly award meetings where everyone congratulated each other on a job well done.

"I know we're all busy here so I will keep this mercifully brief," Charley said. Charley's face looked years longer now that he had shaven off his winter beard. Now, Matt thought somewhat cruelly, what Charley had to do next was lose the extra ten pounds or so he had put on during the winter. "We all know our good friend Joe has been on the copy desk for about five years now, toiling away in what we thought was an obscure fashion. Apparently he wasn't as anonymous as we thought because Joe has just been named the new assistant news editor. Not bad considering that one month after he started here I told my wife that we had made a mistake by hiring him."

Matt didn't hear the remainder of Charley's speech – or Joe's brief comments – because his ears were burning. He couldn't grasp the situation. Joe got his job? How was that possible? He glanced over to where Frank Cooper sat and saw the old man shake Joe's hand. Matt took a look around the newsroom and quickly realized that he was the only one who was not clapping. The one thing Matt was glad about was that he hadn't mentioned his interest in the job to anyone, so no one was looking at him to see his reaction. If they had looked, Matt knew they would have seen confusion, embarrassment, and finally anger. Matt lost track of how long he stood there because the next thing he knew Karen had come up to him and asked if he was okay. Matt

blinked and realized that virtually everyone else in the newsroom had moved back to their respective desks.

"Yeah," Matt responded. "Never been better."

Matt bumped into Frank in the men's room. It was one of those awkward conversations guys have when standing side by side in front of urinals. You couldn't really look at the person you were talking to without risking an uncomfortable downward glance of the eye.

"Matthew," Frank said in acknowledgment of his presence.

"Why Joe?" It was not how Matt had planned to broach the subject but it blurted out before he could swallow the words.

"Well, Matthew, to put it simply, he showed interest. I pushed for you in the initial discussions but when you never brought up the subject with anyone it was assumed that you were happy doing what you were doing. I thought I had made it pretty clear to you that the next step was yours."

"I guess I didn't think it would happen so quickly." Matt knew the response sounded lame.

"The world will never wait until you're ready for it, Matthew." Frank flushed and zipped. "Sometimes you have to jump in without knowing the temperature of the water. See you out there," he said and left.

Was he afraid of the water? Matt asked himself. He washed his hands and face and grabbed a handful of paper towels to dry off with. As he was throwing the towels into the trash, Joe pushed open the bathroom door.

"Hey, Matt," he said.

Be gracious, Matt thought. It wasn't Joe's fault that he was offered the job. It

was likely that Joe didn't even know of Matt's interest.

"Congratulations," Matt said. He shook Joe's hand and started to leave but then his curiosity kicked in. "How did the job come about, anyway?"

"It was so weird," Joe said. "I was happy working on the copy desk and hadn't really thought about if there was anything else here that I wanted to do. Then they asked me one night if I would be interested in applying for the assistant news editor job." Joe acted embarrassed, almost as if Matt would be mad that the powers that be hadn't considered him. "I thought about it for a couple of days and decided that my hours were already bad so why not get some more money? I'm sort of amazed that no one else went for it."

"I guess the timing was right for you," Matt said.

He went back to his computer and tried to concentrate on the stories he had to edit. He was working rim tonight so at least someone else would be checking the stories after he edited them; he figured it would not be one of his better nights. Just as Matt sent a story back to a reporter with a question he sensed someone sit down in the chair next to him. He turned to see Charley, whose face seen up close showed irritation from shaving skin that had been covered by whiskers for months.

"Are you doing okay?" Charley asked.

"I'm all right," Matt answered carefully. He decided that Charley must have known about the opportunity he had blown. Frank Cooper and the others would have gone to him first to get his approval.

"Let's take a quick walk," Charley said. He got up and started to leave and Matt had to hurry to catch up to him, surprised at how fast Charley could move for a big man. They walked down the hallway and into the offices where the editorial pages were written and produced. No one was working at this time of night and Charley sat in one of the chairs. "I won't keep you long," he said, and indicated with a wave of his arm

for Matt to sit down. “I know about the assistant news editor job and I’m sorry if it didn’t work out like you wanted.”

“I guess I wasn’t sure what I wanted,” Matt said.

“One thing I’ve learned is people who hold power deem not making a decision as a decision of its own. In other words, they figured if you had wanted it, you would have said something.”

“I know,” Matt said as he stood, unable to act relaxed. “I think I was expecting the process to work differently, that they would have mentioned it again to me before they moved on to the next candidate.”

“They talked to a few people at a time, Matt. It wasn’t as if you were the only choice.”

“I guess I’m a little naïve on how the promotion process works.”

“You do a good job and there will likely be another opportunity – maybe in a different position – if that’s what you want.” Charley rose from the chair. Matt watched him wipe his hand across his chin. “You know, every year I shave and every year it take me weeks to get used to it. I find myself stroking a beard that isn’t there.”

Matt thought of his one attempt to grow a beard and how unmasculine he felt when he couldn’t connect the mustache to the beard.

“Do me a favor,” Charley said as he headed back toward the newsroom. “Think about what you want to do with your career. If another chance comes along, you want to be ready.”

The brothers were playing catch with a softball in Matt’s back yard. It wasn’t a huge space but it was deep enough that they could give their arms a workout. Both of them had played organized ball when they were younger and both had played in a few

softball leagues as adults. Todd wasn't playing this year but Matt had his season's first game in two weeks, playing for a co-ed team comprised mainly of employees from the paper.

"I can't believe they promoted Joe to the assistant editor's job," Matt whined.

"It sounds like you had your chance, Matt."

"It had only been a few weeks since Frank told me about the job."

"How long do you think they were going to wait without hearing one word of follow-up from you? You should have shown initiative and talked to some people."

"They talked to me."

"It sounds like they mentioned it to you and were hoping you would take the next step."

"I thought I had more time," Matt said, more to himself than to Todd. He knew that Todd was right, just as he knew that Frank and Charley at work had been right, but he needed to vent to someone before he let the issue go.

"Matt, when are you going to learn that the paper treats you like crap? They don't pay squat and the hours are terrible."

"But I like it there."

"And that's what they're banking on. You've told me before that one of the reasons they pay so low is because there are a five hundred people out there that they could get to fill your spot tomorrow. What incentive do they have to make it better for you?"

"What's wrong with liking your job?"

"Nothing is wrong with that. If you like your job then be satisfied with that. If you want to get promoted, then it's up to you to take the initiative. You don't get anything without asking for it."

The more argumentative Todd grew the harder he threw. Matt knew his brother

would have a hard time lifting his throwing arm in a couple of hours but Matt loved the popping sound the ball made as it hit his glove. He relished the smell of the glove's leather and the heft of the softball felt right in his hand. There was something therapeutic about throwing and catching a ball. When they were kids, if their father was in a bad mood, all it usually took was one of the boys to ask him to play catch to snap him out of it. Matt remembered Todd using this technique more often since, for reasons Matt never could understand, Todd bore the brunt of their father's wrath more than he did.

"I guess I screwed up," Matt said.

"You only screwed up if you had really wanted that editor's job."

Good point, Matt thought. The shock of disappointment had covered up his uncertainty about why he hadn't jumped at Frank's initial offer. "By the way," Matt said. "You look pretty beat up, what happened?"

"It's embarrassing," Todd said.

"Come on."

"It's not that exciting. I was at the house of a guy I used to work with and I was playing with his son in the backyard. There was a maple tree that reminded me of the one we had growing up so I had the urge to climb it. I was a little ways up when my foot slipped and I came crashing down. Scraped myself up pretty good and I landed funny on my one leg. My knee has been killing me for days."

It sounded feasible to Matt but something in the smooth way Todd told the story made it sound planned, like something else had happened and this was the story Todd had invented to cover himself. Regardless, the injuries were real.

"You should go to the doctor and have that knee looked at," Matt said.

"Under what insurance?" Todd asked. "All my benefits were cut off, remember?"

"I heard that your ex-company is being investigated by the SEC. Something about restating earnings, or some financial terminology that I don't understand."

"I hope Loserio and the rest of them rot in jail. But that's never going to happen. At worst she'll pay a few million in fines and only have \$200 million left over to live on."

Todd fired the softball over Matt's head and it slammed into the privacy fence that ran the length of the yard. The noise set the German Shepherd next door into a barking frenzy. Even in the safety of his yard Matt felt a little scared of the dog. Matt could remember it coming home as a puppy but it had been raised to be aggressive toward anyone other than its owners. Matt wanted to ask his brother about job hunting but he wasn't sure of the mood. At least the angry dog was on the other side of the fence; an angry Todd could be right in his face. But what the hell, maybe Todd wanted to talk things through.

"Any luck on the job search?"

"There ain't shit out there," Todd said. "Everybody's laying off and no one is hiring. I thought I had more time because of the severance, but . . ."

Matt tried to throw a knuckle ball with middling results. What he was about to say had been roiling in the back of his mind for a couple weeks, but he hadn't known how to broach the subject to someone as proud as Todd.

"Do you need any help, you know, with money?"

Matt couldn't see Todd's reaction from the distance apart they were. His brother started to say something and then took a deep breath before slowly exhaling.

"I really appreciate the offer, Matt, but I hope to God it never comes to that. I am not going to be a charity case for anyone."

"I just wanted you to know it was there if you needed it."

"As a matter of fact," Todd said, "I think I'm going to get me a part-time job for

the summer.”

“Doing what?”

“I have a friend who thinks he can get me into Chestnut Hills Country Club working weddings and banquets.”

Matt held on to the ball. Working as a dishwasher was not the long-term solution that anyone had in mind for Todd. “Again, doing what?”

“Whatever they need. Being a server, helping to set up, cleaning up after events. Throw the ball.”

Matt hesitated, and then tossed the ball to Todd. “What made you consider working there?”

“Well, the job market sucks, I would get paid under the table so it wouldn’t affect my unemployment and they let the help play the course once a week early in the morning. I’ve always wanted to play at Chestnut Hills and this will likely be the only way, seeing as I’m not buddies with any members and I don’t anticipate becoming rich any time soon.”

“Well all right then,” Matt said. It was not a decision he would have made but that was often the case with Todd. Maybe it was time to change the subject. “So, not much news on The Avenger lately. He’s been quiet, eh?”

“Could be it’s getting harder for him to find stupid criminals,” Todd said.

“I doubt that’s the case.”

“Well, then, maybe he’s feeling the pressure to keep coming up with bigger and better ideas. It could be he’s having a form of writer’s block.”

“I hope not,” Matt said. “I think the city needs him to keep going. It gives people something to talk about and offers a little bit of hope.”

“Come on, Matt. People shouldn’t get their hope from some anonymous freak.”

“Why do you think he’s a freak?” Matt asked. “Why can’t he be a normal

person who just wants to help?”

“Believe me, Matt. Probably more than you, I hope The Avenger is not some wacko.”

Matt thought that was a strange answer but he let it slide without commenting. His brother tended to be more extreme with his opinions and this was likely just another exaggeration. They stopped playing catch and went into the house for something to drink. Matt poured himself a glass of water while Todd opened a beer. Matt didn't drink much at home – he didn't like to drink by himself – but he tried to always have a few bottles on hand if needed. He studied his floor and told himself again that he needed to replace the yellow-and-brown-patterned linoleum that must be nearly twenty-five years old. Edges had begun to peel and the style made him feel older than he was. Todd sat on the floor, leaning against a cabinet door, and Matt watched him wipe sweat from his forehead. He looked at the clock on the wall above Todd and felt a pang of disappointment that he would have to leave for work in about an hour. This feeling surprised him because he never dreaded going to the paper. He hoped the feeling would pass because he did not want his job to seem like drudgery; something he had to do rather than enjoyed doing. Just get back into the routine, he told himself; forget about the missed job opportunity and get back to the words.

“Hey,” Todd said. “What do you say about you, me and Karen taking a tour of the wineries down through the Finger Lakes? If I'm gonna start working weekends soon, I want to have some fun first. I'm sure Karen would agree to let you drive so we can enjoy ourselves.”

“I could do it on Sunday,” Matt said. He currently worked a Tuesday through Saturday schedule.

“Good. I'll give Karen a call.”

“Don't bother,” Matt said quickly. He thought back to when Todd kissed

Karen the other night and, although Todd had never even mentioned a romantic interest in Karen, Matt still felt stabs of jealousy when the two of them had contact without him around. "I'll see her at work and can ask her then."

"Speaking of Karen, when are you going to do something about your multi-year infatuation? She's an attractive woman, you know. She's not going to stay unattached forever."

Matt felt himself blush. He was thirty-three years old and he still had a hard time talking about girls with his brother.

"I probably missed my chance, if I ever had one."

"Matt, didn't you learn anything from not getting that job? You don't always have to be a wus. Take a freakin' chance for once in your life."

Matt watched his brother move around the kitchen. Whenever Todd became agitated he could not stay still. Todd washed out his empty beer bottle in the sink and moved to the fridge. He started to pull out another bottle but then hesitated before replacing it on the shelf and closing the door. He turned to face Matt.

"If you're content to be her friend then maybe I'll ask her out," Todd said.

Matt stared at his brother, first in shock, then in mounting anger. "How long have you been wanting to say that?" Matt asked. "You've always wanted to take what was mine."

"First of all," Todd said. "I don't think Karen would appreciate being called yours, and second, she's an attractive, intelligent, fun person. What's not to be interested in?"

"That is so wrong," Matt sputtered. He thought he caught a gleam of mischief in Todd's eyes and figured he was being played with, but that didn't keep the anger from building.

"Why is it wrong? How long have you known her?"

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“How long?”

Matt figured the timing in his head. He had been at the paper for at least six or seven years when Karen was hired.

“Probably around three years,” he answered.

“Three years. You have pined after someone for three years without making a move. How long were you planning on waiting, five, six years?” Todd grabbed a bag of potato chips from the top of the refrigerator and took out a handful. “Maybe you’re never going to do anything about it. That’s what I think, I bet you’re too scared of getting rejected to ever ask her out. It’s safer for you to do nothing. At least this way you can dream about her every night.”

“Why are you being such a prick?” Matt asked. “What did I do to you?”

“I guess I’m trying to shock you into action. You missed out on the job, you probably missed any shot you may have had with Karen; you just watch your life float past.” Todd put more chips in his mouth and Matt watched the crumbs fall to the floor. “You’re content to always have your dreams out of reach, to hold out hope that tomorrow might be better than today. I want today to be the day that something good happens.”

Throughout the conversation Todd paced around the kitchen as Matt sat at the table. Matt didn’t know what to make of this confrontation. He knew Todd was out of sorts because of his job situation but what had provoked this sudden attack? Matt was torn between getting really angry and being genuinely concerned about his brother. All of this animosity had to have deeper roots than Karen. He decided to take the high road; he figured he owed Todd that much.

“What’s wrong, Todd?”

Todd stopped in mid-munch. “What’s wrong with me? I thought we were

talking about what was wrong with you?”

“You’ve been acting strange for a while now. You’re angry, short-tempered, antagonistic.” He stood and walked to where his brother leaned against the counter.

“Are you in trouble?”

At first Matt thought his brother’s eyes softened and he hoped that he had reached Todd in some way, but then the rebellious side, the ‘I don’t need anyone’s help’ side took over.

“You should worry about your own problems, brother of mine. I can take care of myself.”

This is obviously not working, Matt thought. Time to make one more attempt, and if it didn’t help, well then, as Todd said, he could take care of himself.

“Come on Todd,” he said softly. “We’re family. Dad always said we should stick together.”

At this Matt heard his brother offer a sarcastic laugh.

“Maybe your father said that but mine sure as hell never did.”

Matt knew that he stood with his mouth open but he couldn’t move the muscles to close it. He replayed what Todd said a couple of times but it still would not make sense, so he was forced to ask.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means exactly what I said,” Todd answered. “It means that you and I, although having the same mother, had different fathers. It means that there was a reason for all of those times when ‘Dad,’ ” Todd made quotation signs with his fingers, “was harder on me than you.”

“I don’t understand,” Matt said softly. He stumbled back to the table and half-sat, half-fell into a chair.

“Then let me explain it to you. Not long after you were born, our dear Mother

had an affair. She was obviously not careful and I was the result. Due to your father's forgiveness – or weakness, take your pick – he kept the family together and raised me as his own.”

“I don't believe you,” Matt said. “How did you find out?”

Todd didn't answer at first and Matt watched the anger drain from his brother's face now that he had played his trump card. Todd slumped to the floor and sat with his back against the fridge and his hands hugging his knees.

“I didn't find out until a few years after the accident. When I was getting ready for college Aunt Janet gave me a letter that Mom had written years before. I don't know if she had had a premonition or what, but she wanted to let me know the truth if anything happened to her. Apparently she kept it in a safe deposit box and Aunt Janet received it with instructions to wait until I was old enough to understand a little better. Like you're ever gonna be old enough to understand that the man who raised you was not your real father.”

“Did Dad know?”

“Yeah, he knew. Aunt Janet said that if it wasn't for you then he likely would have left Mom and got a divorce.”

“Do you know who your biological father is?”

“No. And Aunt Janet told me that she didn't either – or even if Dad did for that matter. I don't know if anyone other than Mom knew.”

“Wow,” Matt said. “That is truly mind-boggling.” He then quickly sat up and stared hard at Todd “You're not bullshitting me, are you? That would not be funny.”

“Matt,” Todd answered in a calm, almost defeated voice. “Do I look like I'm bullshitting you?”

Matt knew that what his brother had said was the truth. He wasn't sure why he believed it so readily but maybe the revelation explained some inconsistencies of the

past. He looked at the clock and realized that he needed to leave for work in a few minutes. Matt briefly considered calling in and pretending to be sick but that would leave everyone else short-handed. There was no time to eat dinner first; the best he could do was to grab an apple and change clothes. He glanced again at Todd, who looked drained. For the first time Matt had a vision of what his brother – or he guessed now his half-brother – would look like as an older man. There were too many things to think about but he had to go.

“Listen,” Matt said. “I have to leave for work in a minute but stay here as long as you want. Make yourself some dinner or crash for awhile if you need to.” He thought about giving his brother a hug but they were never the most physically intimate of families. Instead, he quickly changed clothes and then walked over to Todd and clasped his shoulder. “Thanks for telling me,” he said, and then left the house.

Work went better than he would have anticipated. He had found himself concentrating extra hard on the stories so he wouldn’t think about everything else going on in his life. Charley even congratulated him for catching a couple of gaffes that otherwise would have been published. When he returned home he saw that Todd’s car was still on the street in front of his house. In a way Matt hoped that his brother was sleeping; he didn’t know if he could handle another heavy conversation and there was much to think about. He entered the house and soon saw Todd stretched out on the living room couch. Matt quietly grabbed an extra blanket and spread it over Todd and then sat on the floor and watched his little brother. For fourteen years Todd had carried the secret inside him and Matt wondered if he was the first person that had been told. He supposed there may have been a girl or two along the way that Todd had shared this with, maybe hoping to play the sympathy card, but really, all they had was each other.

How hard it must have been to learn the truth and not be able to confront anyone, or question why, or simply talk it through. Matt still had a hard time believing that his mother had had an affair. He must have been only a few months old at the time. What did his mother do, put him down for a nap and then invite someone into the house? He knew his nursery was across the hall from his parent's room so he would have been maybe twenty feet away from the scene. Maybe she dropped him off at a babysitter and then had a clandestine meeting. He couldn't imagine his mother skulking around a hotel for a quick tryst; but then again, he wouldn't have imagined an affair to begin with. And what about his father, how did he react? Whatever issues his parents had, they must have either worked them out or put on a brave face because Matt could not remember too much unhappiness in the house. But then again, more than once Todd had accused him of being clueless.

Matt quietly walked over to where the picture from the Florida vacation was and picked it up. His parents looked happy, but this was twelve, thirteen years later. This was going to take some getting used to. Todd would likely never know who his biological father was, which was not something Matt would want to carry around for the rest of his life. And by his brother's actions today, Matt was sure that Todd had not fully come to terms with the knowledge.

9

Karen sat in front of her work terminal and sifted through pages of notes concerning The Avenger. She had spoken to psychiatrists and conducted man on the street interviews. She had talked to Matt about comic book super heroes, such as Daredevil and Wolverine, so she could correctly reference them. What was missing was a strong angle from the police point of view. A couple of cops had told her off the record that they admired The Avenger because he could do what the law held them back from doing. Detective Simmons did go on the record to say that The Avenger was a vigilante who should be thrown in jail with the rest of the ingrates. The worst part of the story, however, was the simple fact that The Avenger had not done anything of note lately. The last thing he did was set the car on fire and that was a couple of weeks ago. If he wasn't going to avenge any wrongs, then what kind of story would she have?

The buzz of her co-workers was a white noise she had become accustomed to, so much so that she had a hard time working when it was too quiet. Her comfort with the turmoil of the room allowed Alan to approach her from behind and watch over her shoulder for a moment before she sensed his presence.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Not much,” Karen answered. She wasn’t working on a story for tomorrow so she was curious as to what he wanted. “You’re looking a little tired tonight.”

“With three young kids there’s always one of them that’s not sleeping through the night. I’ll recover in about fifteen years.”

Karen knew her boss well enough to know that there was a reason he stopped by, so she waited for him to spill what was on his mind.

“How’s The Avenger feature coming along?” he asked.

There it was, Karen thought. “Slower than I would like,” she said. “I’ve got a lot of good stuff but I’m missing a couple of key points that’ll tie it all together.”

“Do you have a few minutes to come into Catherine’s office to talk about the project?”

“Sure,” Karen said. “Give me a second to get some things together.”

“Don’t take too long, she’s waiting.”

Alan walked toward Catherine’s office and Karen felt a nervousness like she had on her first day of work. Catherine was the editor of the paper, a woman Karen looked up to as the career model she wanted to follow. Catherine had started as a reporter and worked her way through the levels and layers of management until she had reached this point. The only place she could go from here was to be a publisher at another paper in the chain. But if reporting was in your blood, being the editor was better because you were responsible for the newsroom; the publisher had to run the paper’s entire operation and be more concerned with the financials. Karen had exchanged a few snippets of conversation with Catherine from time to time but she had never been summoned for an official meeting. Karen took a deep breath and walked toward the end of the newsroom where Catherine’s office was located. It was a rectangular room with the two long sides constructed of almost all windows. One of the windowed sides overlooked the city with a view that Karen found to make Genesee

more impressive than it really was. The other long side faced the newsroom. The glass on this side was tinted so Catherine could survey her domain when she wanted but no one could see inside. Karen knocked on the half-open door and entered. She was expecting Alan and Catherine, but there was also the graphics and special sections editors.

“Come on in, Karen,” Catherine said. “We all thought it was time to start planning what this Avenger package is going to look like.”

Package, Karen thought, what package? She had thought it was going to be one large story, but if they wanted to go bigger, that was fine with her. She looked at Catherine and realized the woman exuded power. She was of average height and her body had thickened since Karen had started at the paper. Her hair had recently been dyed a deep maroon and Karen found it difficult to look her in the eye for very long due to the intensity of her focus. She thought it interesting that Catherine treated her as if they had worked together for years.

“Here’s what we’re thinking,” Catherine continued. “We anticipate the centerpiece story being huge. Eighty, ninety, even a hundred inches if necessary.”

Karen was stunned. A 100-inch story was about twice as big as anything she had published to date: she would definitely have to talk to more sources.

“We want a timeline sidebar of all of The Avenger’s episodes so far. We don’t know what this character looks like so we obviously can’t run any photos, but Sam has come up with a few sketches that we should be able to make use of.”

Karen looked at the drawings that Sam, the graphics editor, placed in front of her. The largest one showed a man balled up into the fetal position trying to fend off a looming shadow, which Karen understood was supposed to represent The Avenger. There were also a couple of stylized text spellings of The Avenger’s name. Karen’s first impression was that it all looked a little cheesy.

“What do you think?” Sam asked.

Karen pondered how honest she should be, then decided she should speak her mind. “It looks a little too cartoony to me,” she said. She watched as the editors looked at each other and Karen thought they were all trying not to laugh, like there was an inside joke she was not privy to.

“Well,” Catherine said. “You have to admit, The Avenger is almost straight out of a comic book.”

Karen felt herself blushing, and the more she tried to control the mixture of anger and embarrassment, the more she could feel herself burn. She had always been a blotcher when she felt in the spotlight. The others in the room were obviously not taking this as seriously as she was. Even Alan was grinning, and she thought he had understood.

“If you think this is all a big joke,” Karen said, “then why are you planning such a big splash?”

“Because that’s what people want to read about,” Catherine said. “And we don’t make the news up, we just report it. So, the plan is to run this on a Sunday, the question is when?” She looked at Karen.

“I’m getting close,” she said. “There’s a couple of more pieces I need to get answered.”

“Has this guy done anything recently?” Sam asked.

“Not in the last week or two,” Karen said.

“Do you think he’s still out there?”

“Yes.” This was something that Karen had not wanted to consider. She had always thought The Avenger would be there until she found him. The idea that he would slink back to wherever he had come from had never entered her mind. She was afraid to hear what was coming next.

“You realize,” Catherine said, “that if he doesn’t continue to play his game then we don’t have a story?”

“I know.” Karen felt like she was six years old and getting chastised for coloring on the living room wall.

“All right, I think we have a better idea of what we’re doing,” Catherine said. Everyone stood up and readied to leave so Karen did the same. She started to follow Alan out the door when Catherine stopped her. “Karen, can you stay for another minute?”

Karen returned to the leather chair she had been sitting in and waited for the others to leave. She had never before been alone with Catherine in this type of atmosphere and her curiosity was piqued. Catherine kept her back to Karen until the room emptied and then turned to face her.

“I agree with you, Karen. I think The Avenger is still out there, lurking in whatever shadow he hides in. I’m not concerned that the story won’t run. I am, however, a little bit concerned about you.”

“What do you mean?” Karen barely knew this woman, why would she be concerned?

“I feel it’s part of my job to help staffers who I think hold promise. I remember what it was like to struggle every day, wondering if anyone was noticing the job I was doing. I especially feel good when the person I want to help is female. You can bitch all you want about this company – and some of the complaints are valid – but one thing we can’t complain about is their record of promoting women. In other chains I would not be standing here now talking to you as the editor. I pushed for you to be the one who covered The Avenger because I thought you needed something that could take you to the next level. I don’t know you well enough to understand where you expect to be in five or ten years . . . how old are you?”

"Thirty-three."

"I'm almost fifteen years older than you. When I was your age I think I had just got my first assistant editor job. I, too, worked the police beat for a year – the first woman at my paper to do so – so I can imagine the struggle you have with some members of our city's finest."

Karen listened with a mixture of awe and trepidation, since she was still unsure where the conversation was headed. Catherine would get to the crux eventually and Karen was just along for the ride. For the moment she was content to be the singular focus of Catherine's attention.

"Stories like this can make a reputation, but not covering your beat every day can tear that reputation down. It would be easy to concentrate on the glory and ignore the rest and we don't want that to happen with you. My point is that I believe you have talent and I want to help you in any way I can. I would hope that you try to move up in the world, although it can make for some tough personal choices."

"Tell me about it," Karen said, immediately hoping that she didn't sound too glib. She was also wondering if she had been reprimanded somehow.

"If you stay with this company, they would expect you to move for a better position. It can be a lonely life without a support system in place. But it's hard to ask a partner to move every few years. You really have to love what you do."

Karen looked at Catherine and wondered how hard her life had been. On the surface she looked every bit the successful woman, but that was her game face; Karen couldn't guess what she felt when she went home at night. She knew Catherine was divorced, and that she had a son who was college-age now. Catherine must be brutally aware of what she had given up for her career, whereas Karen could only imagine what she might be missing in her own life.

"Anyway," Catherine said. "Enough pontificating. I know you're a

professional. If you could, send me an outline of The Avenger profile before you leave. And Karen, we expect big things out of you from this Avenger piece.”

“Thank you,” Karen said. She wasn’t sure what else to say and Catherine had turned her attention to something else. On her way back to her desk she passed Greg, the political reporter.

“A little tête-à-tête with the boss?” he asked.

“When you’re a star, everyone wants a piece of you.”

She meant it as a joke, but there was a grain of truth to how she felt. She felt emboldened by her meeting with Catherine. Not everyone was told by the editor that her future within the company was bright. She saw Alan wave his hand to get her attention and she wandered over to his desk.

“Feeling pretty good?”

“Yeah. I didn’t realize she knew I existed and then to hear some of the things she said; well, it’s motivating.”

“I’m happy for you but I also have a reality check.”

“What’s that?”

“There was a car chase through downtown that resulted in a few pedestrians getting injured. It ended a couple of blocks from here and I need you to cover it.”

“But I’m supposed to get Catherine an outline for The Avenger piece.”

“Karen,” Alan said. “I’m sure you can do both. I know you’re feeling good about yourself but do me a favor – please don’t forget that you have a beat.”

“That’s what Catherine said. Did you put her up to it?”

“No.” Karen thought he answered a little too quickly. “But there’s still more to your job than The Avenger.”

“I know that,” she answered. She said the words, but at the moment she didn’t believe them.

She returned to her desk and grabbed a notebook and pen. As she put on her jacket, Alicia approached her. Alicia had befriended her when Karen had first started at the paper, explaining the politics of the newsroom and inviting her to hang out with other reporters. She wrote about education, although Karen knew she aspired to a more glamorous beat. The two were about the same age, both were single and, if Karen thought about it, she was surprised they hadn't become better friends.

"We're heading out to Nash's for a few beers," Alicia said. "Feel like coming?"

"Unfortunately, I have to go cover a car chase," Karen said.

"Stop by when you're done, I'm sure we'll be closing the place."

"We'll see. I have to get something to Catherine before I leave tonight."

"Catherine?" Alicia expressed surprise. "She hasn't said more than two words to me in the past year."

Karen felt good. She was obviously gaining entry to a club that her peers couldn't obtain. Of course if things worked out for her then maybe they wouldn't be her peers much longer.

"She seems to have taken a shine to me," Karen said. "God, wouldn't it be great to be mentored by someone like Catherine?"

"Odds are I'll never know," Alicia said. She started to walk away.

"I'll help you if I get the chance," Karen said. She saw Alicia stop for a moment and then move on.

Karen felt wired. She looked around the newsroom and was the only reporter left. Her story had been filed and edited and it was about 1:30 in the morning by the time she sent Catherine the outline. She knew there was no chance of falling asleep any time soon and she was in the mood for a beer or three. And she felt chatty. She thought

about swinging by the bar but figured by the time she got there it would almost be last call. She wished to God that there were someone waiting at home for her, even if he was zonked out in bed with the alarm set to go off in four hours. The best she had, unfortunately, was Matt, who looked like he was about ready to use his PC as a pillow. Karen knew that all she had to do was ask him if he wanted to stop by for a beer and he would immediately perk up.

Thirty minutes later Matt was in her living room, plopped into the reclining chair that he had adopted as his own and Karen went to grab a couple of beers from the kitchen. She opened both and took a long drink from hers before she returned to the living room. Lord, did beer taste good, she thought. Not quite as good as a well-made gin and tonic mind you, but considering it was two in the morning and she had worked an eleven-hour shift, beer would work just fine.

“So,” Matt asked as he reached for the bottle she offered. “How’s the big project going?”

Karen knew that he was referring to her upcoming piece on *The Avenger*. “It’s going slower than I would like,” she answered.

She wanted to be selfish with this story. She wanted this to be huge and she wanted to win awards. She wanted the national media to come to her with their questions, to acknowledge her as *The Avenger* expert. And after talking to Todd the other day she now wanted a book deal. There weren’t many chances in a reporter’s career to break through and own a story. Granted, she thought, this may not be as important as discovering evidence that freed someone who had been wrongly imprisoned for 25 years as one of her colleagues had recently done, but you play the hand that was dealt you. And if you were a gambler – and most investigative reporters were – then at least once in your career you take those cards and play for the big jackpot. This one was her ‘push all the chips to the middle and call.’ It was at times like

this that Karen could not conceive of ever giving up her career and starting a family.

She wanted to follow in Catherine's footsteps.

"I want to find out who he is," she said.

"The Avenger?"

"Yup."

"Why?"

"Because that would be the ultimate scoop."

"But it would ruin everything," Matt said. "He wouldn't be able to continue, and it might even be dangerous if people knew his identity."

"I would assume that he knew the risks when he started. And besides, everyone wants to know who it is."

"Not everybody," Matt said. "I don't."

"Come on, Matt. You mean to tell me you're not even remotely curious?"

"Of course I'm curious." He started to sound defensive. "But I also want to believe that someone like that is out there. I don't have to know who he is, only that he exists."

"Grow up, Matt. This isn't a comic book." Karen did not want to sound harsh but at this time of the morning she didn't need Matt to play devil's advocate; she wanted everyone to cheer her on.

"Isn't it enough that you're getting some good stories out of this?"

"You don't understand. You're a copy editor." She saw a brief flash of anger in his eyes. "Sorry, that sounded ruder than intended. What I meant was that there is ego involved in being a reporter. Every time one of my stories is published it's conceivable that a million people out there could see my name. You get so you need it, like it's a drug and having a page-one story is the equivalent to sticking a needle in your arm."

Karen surprised herself with that admission. She had never thought of reporting in

quite that way before but she knew it to be a truer statement than anything else she could say right now.

“And in order to keep getting that high,” Matt said, “you end up doing things you know aren’t necessarily right.”

“What’s not right about it? Do you think the police are wrong because they want to know who he is? If you can’t see the thrill in pursuing a story like this then maybe you are in the wrong business,” she said. “I don’t need to justify myself to you.” She did not want Matt to think less of her but she couldn’t allow herself to ponder his view too deeply. “I need another beer,” she said.

“I’ll get it,” Matt said.

He got up from the chair and left it in the reclined position. Karen climbed into the vacated spot and closed her eyes. She wasn’t tired in the least, which bothered her because she had not been getting near enough sleep lately. She needed at least seven hours a night but had been operating on four or five for the past few weeks. She got this way when she became obsessed, and she was obsessed with The Avenger. Not the same as Matt, who was obsessed in a hero-worship kind of way, but she was always thinking of a new angle for the article, looking over her notes in search of a hidden clue, tracking down another dead-end lead. She didn’t hear Matt return from the kitchen and she jumped when he touched the back of her neck with the beer bottle.

“One more thing and I’ll let this go,” he said. “Do you think that what The Avenger does is good?”

“He’s on the verge of being a criminal himself, but yeah, I guess he’s making a statement that has resonated with a lot of people.”

“Do you think that I’m the only one who looks up to him?”

“No, Matt, I know thousands of people are fascinated with The Avenger. What’s your point?” she asked, even though she knew where this was headed.

"You realize that if you manage to discover who The Avenger is, that his career would be over."

"I know," she said. "That's the part I try not to think about too much." But her reasons were slightly more self-serving than Matt's.

The phone rang, which saved Karen from having to further rationalize her motives. Not unexpectedly, it was Todd. It was at least the third time in the last month or so that he had called this late.

"Hey," she said.

"What're you doing?" Todd asked.

"Just having a beer with Matt."

Matt looked up when he heard his name. Karen knew he would be curious as to who was calling her at 2:30 in the morning so she mouthed to him that it was Todd.

"Why the hell is he calling you now?" Matt asked.

"I can't sleep," Todd said.

"Hold on a second," Karen told Todd. "I can't have two conversations at once." She walked into the kitchen so she wouldn't have to listen to, or see, Matt. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

"I can't sleep," Todd repeated. "I should get up in a few hours but I am so on edge."

"This has been happening a lot lately, hasn't it?" She knew that the chances were good that Todd didn't call every time he couldn't sleep.

"Was that Matt's voice I heard a second ago?"

"Yup. I was so wired from work I needed someone to talk to."

"And I'm sure it didn't take much convincing to get Matt to stop by. What's new at the paper?"

"I had a little chat with the editor today about The Avenger. I'm so close to

having a great story, but I need him to start saving the world again, and soon. The bigger, the better.”

“You, too? It seems everyone wants him to do something huge.”

“Well, he made a pretty big splash into our consciousness, it’s only natural that we expect more of the same. I don’t think people are ready to be done with him yet.” Karen put away some cups and plates from the dish drainer as she spoke. As much as she liked talking about The Avenger she felt it was time for Todd to get to whatever point he had for calling. “What’s bothering you, Todd?”

“I don’t know. Nothing I can put my finger on but I feel stressed, like my world keeps changing and I’m not gonna like where it goes next.”

“That’s expected. You lost your job and you’re unsure of what to do.” Todd worried her when he talked like that. She sat on the linoleum and leaned against the refrigerator. “Is there anything I can do for you?” she asked.

“Just help me when I need it,” he said.

“And when will that be?”

“You’ll know.”

“That’s awful damn cryptic for this time of night, Todd.”

“I’m going to try again to sleep. I’ll talk to you later.”

He hung up and Karen remained slumped, holding the phone to her ear. She knew what he said was going to prey on her mind for the rest of the night. What sort of help was he looking to her for? There would be something, though. Todd always was the one to go too far. Matt did all of his escaping in his head – he wouldn’t dream of actually doing most of what he thought about. But Todd, Todd wasn’t afraid to try things. He was the one who told her that he shoplifted baseball cards when he was a kid. He had girlfriends in junior high, before Karen or Matt would barely talk to someone of the opposite sex. He was the one to pick a fight in some bar because he

thought someone was an idiot. This trait made him interesting to be around but was also infuriating if you cared for him.

The beeping of the phone from being off the hook brought Karen back to the here and now. She stood up and hung the phone up as Matt entered the kitchen.

“And what did our friend Todd want?”

“He couldn’t fall asleep and wanted to talk for a few minutes.”

“Does he call you this late very often?”

Karen could tell that Matt was trying not to sound jealous but it wasn’t working all that well.

“Every once in a while. Why, does that bother you?”

“No,” he said in a voice that reminded her of a little boy. “It just seems like an odd time to be calling someone.”

“Do you think that Todd cares that you’re here now having a beer?”

“Probably not.”

Karen could tell he hadn’t thought of that. “I’m tired, Matt, why don’t you go home,” she said.

He looked hurt but she didn’t care. Between having to rationalize her career moves to him and thinking about what Todd had just said her brain did not have the capacity for another argument. She could hear footsteps from the couple in the apartment above her, and every so often a muffled voice. Usually this meant that one or the other was drunk and an argument would soon take place. Her head began to pound and she wanted to curl up under her comforter and have it be tomorrow. Matt looked lost but he finished his beer and turned to leave.

“I’ll see ya at work, OK?” he said.

He tried to lean forward and give her a good-bye kiss, undoubtedly remembering Todd’s action, but Karen leaned back out of reach.

“What are you doing, Matt?”

He looked flustered. “Sorry, I . . . I don’t know. Goodnight.” He turned and left her apartment before Karen could say anything.

“Sure. I’ll see you later,” she said to the closed door. Now Karen felt tired, although she knew that before she fell asleep she would think about why she hadn’t minded Todd kissing her but she had backed away from Matt.

Karen felt as if she was in a dream, with some of her surroundings familiar but other parts foreign. She was in her mother’s house and looked at the boxes scattered across the floor of the upstairs bedroom, the room that was hers through junior and senior high school. Her mother had made a half-hearted attempt to reclaim the room after Karen had moved out, but it was now a mixture of mother and daughter.

“So,” Karen said. “I see you’re set on leaving.”

“I am,” answered her mother.

Posters of musicians and television stars who had been popular fifteen years ago were still taped to the walls; however, the bright pink paint that Karen had favored had long since been replaced by a calmer light green, and she couldn’t understand why her mother had replaced the posters after repainting. Plastic bags filled with skeins of yarn now sat where her stereo system used to be. The mirror on the closet door – the one she would stand in front of for seemingly hours, trying to get her outfit or hair just right – had been taken down. Not that she had kept a lot of her junk stored at the house but Karen now had to take everything that she didn’t want thrown out or sold. Not right away, mind you, but soon enough.

“The plan is to stay here through the summer and then move to Arizona after Labor Day. No need to move there during the hottest part of the year.”

"So I have you for a few more months?" Karen said.

"You're not losing me, honey. This will give you a good excuse every year to get out of the winter weather for a week and come visit."

She knew her mom meant well but the idea of spending a week in Arizona in a seniors' complex was not that appealing to Karen. There would have to be other attractions for her to make that trip every year. She wandered over to an open box and sat down, sifting through the stuffed animals left over from her childhood.

"Do you remember when I couldn't go to bed until all of my animals were in bed with me? At one time there must have been six or seven."

"I remember," her mom said with a laugh. "On more than one occasion your father would be swearing up a storm as he searched under every couch and chair, and in the closets while you screamed like we were torturing you."

"Look, here's my bunny," Karen said. She picked up a small knitted creature that was missing an eye and had one ear barely attached to the head.

"I made that," her mom said, and came over to sit next to Karen.

"You did not. You did? I loved that bunny. I even took him to college with me for a couple of years."

"You don't know how good I felt that instead of all those toys we bought, you had to have something I made." Her mother reached over and took the bunny from Karen's hands. "I know I've told you how colicky a baby you were. Well, I used to sit in the rocking chair we had in the living room and knit while Dad would hold you and pace across the living room and kitchen. Back and forth, back and forth. You would scream for hours. As soon as we thought you had fallen asleep, we'd try to put you in your crib and then you would start up again."

"Stop it, you're making me feel bad."

"Someday you'll have your own baby to stay up all night with."

"Mom, I've told you repeatedly; chances are I'm not going to have any children."

"You may have told me but I don't believe you."

"Whatever," Karen said. She couldn't understand why her mom held onto the notion of becoming a grandmother through her. Of course, she was an only child so her mom had no one else to pin her hopes on. She thought back to her chat with Catherine and was now even more convinced that a career was the best path for her. Any maternal urges she had felt after visiting with Marci and Madison had been pushed aside.

"Speaking of kids, did I tell you I had dinner over at Marci's a few weeks ago?"

"I always liked her. How is she? She has a toddler. A girl, right?"

"Little Madison. Mom, she is so cute. I think Marci is trying to decide between having another child and restarting her career."

"It's a tough choice. Marci knows what she has and she knows what she is missing. Sometimes I wish I had had another baby."

"Why didn't you? Was I that perfect that you were scared another baby couldn't compare?" Karen stood and picked through another nearby box.

"Don't flatter yourself. Help me up, would you? Actually, I think the reason is one you could appreciate. At that time it was almost frowned upon to be a stay-at-home mother and I was worried that if another baby came along that I would have to give up any hopes of a career. Looking back, I was probably too influenced by the times."

Karen thought about her mother's words as they made their way to the kitchen. She remembered having to go to a friend's house for an hour after school until her mom came home from work. And she knew she went to a pre-school while other kids were able to stay at home for another year. Who knew which way was best? Why did men have it so easy, she wondered? They could be a parent and they were expected to

have a career – it wasn't either/or, it was both.

Her mom had opened the wooden door, leaving the screen door shut, which allowed a portion of the spring breeze to waft through the house and add an air of freshness. It saddened her to think that the number of times she would set foot in this house was now likely in the single-digits. Before she could get too melancholy, a noise from outside drew her attention.

“What’s that?” she asked as she walked toward the door.

“Probably that darn bird,” her mom answered. “It’s been doing this for a week now.”

Karen watched a male cardinal perched on the side of her mom’s car. The bird was looking at its own reflection in the side-view mirror and thought it was looking at a different bird. The cardinal would squawk and occasionally peck at its reflection.

“How stupid,” Karen said. “It’s fighting with itself.”

“Seems to be going around,” her mom said.

“What was that?” Karen asked, even though she heard.

“Oh, nothing. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“I’m not fighting myself, Mother. I know what I want to do. There’s nothing wrong with not wanting to have children.”

“That’s true. I just want you to be sure before it’s too late to change your mind. It’s not fun being lonely when you get old.”

“I’m sure,” Karen said. But she knew she wasn’t and she suddenly felt like crying as she imagined herself as a seventy-year-old, living alone with no one around to help her.

10

The reception room was still being readied when Todd reported to work. Two large ice sculptures portraying graceful swans taking flight were being positioned in the center of the room and tables on the outskirts were being loaded with a multitude of cheese, crackers and fruits. The head table had settings for twenty people. He wondered how much control the bride had over the preparations or if her mother made all of the decisions. Loserio probably had spent her time planning this wedding as her company spiraled into bankruptcy, he thought.

The room could hold up to 500 guests and Todd guessed that those attendees would be the richest people in the city, not to mention those that flew in for the event. Todd's responsibility would be to walk among the celebrants with a tray filled with glasses of wine. He would hand out fresh glasses and collect the empties. Not the toughest job in the world, but it would hopefully give him the intimate access to Susan Loserio he needed to carry out the vague plan that had begun to form in his brain. The only difference would be that it would not be The Avenger who showed up, simply Todd.

This would likely be the reception of the year at the facility and Todd had had a

hard time convincing the banquet manager that he should be allowed to work the event. He had worked the two Saturdays before as a sort of warm-up test to prove his worth. Not that the help would receive any higher tips than normal but it was still seen as a prestigious gig. The reception would start at six in the evening and run until whenever. Todd wore black pants, a long-sleeved, button-down, collar-less white shirt with a black vest and he felt as if he was better dressed than the groomsmen of most weddings he had been to.

Todd walked into the kitchen area and watched for a second as the bulked-up staff prepped the hors d'oeuvres. The amount of work that went into the appetizers did not seem equivalent to the nonchalant way the guests would treat them. The main courses were also underway: the guests had a choice of duck roasted in a red wine marinade, beef tenderloin tips sautéed in a mushroom sauce, or a broiled fish dish that Todd had never heard of. He did not even want to consider the timing involved in ensuring each guest received a warm, fresh meal. The competing scents made Todd, along with the rest of the staff, hope that they would be able to eat some of the leftovers.

He walked to the room where the cases of wine were stored. Loserio wanted staff members circulating with wine to make it easier for the guests. The selection that Todd would carry – Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon – was not as vast as what the three fully stocked bars offered, but the idea was accessibility. He was glad that the scratches on his face had finally healed, but his knee still gave him trouble from time to time and he prayed it wouldn't give out on him as he carried around a tray loaded with drinks.

Todd stopped in the bathroom one last time before starting his rounds. As he washed his hands, he stared at his reflection in the mirror above the sink and whispered, "I am The Avenger. I can't stop being The Avenger. Sometimes I want to."

He stopped talking when he realized the words were being spoken aloud to no one but him. Once he had started with The Avenger gig it had become so natural, such a high, that all he looked forward to was the next job, the next way to avenge a wrong. It wasn't as if he was still hung up on comic book heroes; the way Todd remembered his youthful summer days, when he and Matt dreamed of having super powers he was always more amused by how seriously Matt took everything. And it wasn't as if he had any super powers now. It was more likely that he had some sort of mental deficiency that kept thrusting him into increasingly dangerous situations. He now felt the need to top himself and it seemed to Todd that he was stuck. The media wanted more Avenger, the public wanted more Avenger, and he had no idea what to do next. He had watched one of the local news stations the other night and the anchor had called The Avenger a fraud since he hadn't done anything for the past few weeks. He couldn't believe the ever-increasing pressure and he found himself frozen with indecision. Something needed to change; either he would have to give up being The Avenger or it would need to totally consume him. Being a half-assed hero had got him in the papers and on television but it wouldn't keep him there. The whole Eddie scenario had been an obvious fiasco and now Todd had lost confidence in his ability to act. And ever since he had confided to Matt the truth about his father, he had lost something in his personality: an edge, the chip on his shoulder, the anger inside him that made him seethe.

Matt's idolization of The Avenger did not help the situation. Whenever his brother told him about The Avenger's latest adventures, Todd had to act surprised and offer theories about the situation. Sometimes Todd wanted to scream at Matt, 'Don't you understand that it's me? Why can't you help me?' Matt was a smart guy, Todd thought he would have had a clue by now. But his brother wanted to believe someone was out there fighting the bad guys. Matt might have always wanted to be that person

but Todd believed his brother thought it good enough that someone was. Karen was a different story. Todd didn't know what would happen when she eventually confronted him, and he had little doubt of the occurrence of that future confrontation. She was obsessed with her career, and therefore The Avenger, and he knew that he could be the story that won her fame and fortune. Part of him wanted to give it to her; but he wasn't ready yet and besides, that would be too easy for her, she should have to work harder for it. If she did discover his secret he would congratulate her. He wondered when the time came if he would be so blasé.

What he wanted to do was bring down Susan Loserio. That had to be his next move, even if he acted as Todd rather than The Avenger. But how could he attack someone like her? He wasn't going to shoot her. He couldn't very well steal the \$266 million she made off the company stock. He wouldn't burn her mansion down. The way to touch someone like her was through her reputation, Todd thought. She had to have an enormous ego to become a CEO, and if he was able to embarrass her somehow, that might strike to the heart of what made her run. The only way he could see doing this was at her daughter's wedding reception. Loserio soon would be in her glory, showing off her daughter, her wealth and her taste to all of her friends and associates. What better avenue to make her look bad? Not that a stunt at the reception would make up for losing his job, or the hundreds of other people she put out of work, or the thousands who were financially burned by the bankruptcy, but it might help turn Fate's momentum against her. And right now, that was the best he could hope for. He waved his hands under the hot air dryer and went back to work.

Guests began to arrive in droves and Todd was kept hopping from the start. His tray could hold twelve glasses and he barely made it twenty feet into the room before it was empty. He was told that the club had around one thousand glasses so it was important for him to collect the empties and hurry them back to the dishwashing area.

One other worker was doing the same job as him so the desire was that one of them would be on the floor at all times. Half an hour went by before Todd could blink. He had yet to see Loserio – probably because the receiving line would take forever – but it was only a matter of time.

At seven the guests were asked to take their seats so the wedding party could be introduced. Todd collected empty glasses that had been left lying about and then watched the procession. It wasn't as raucous of a crowd as many weddings he had been to; there was more polite applause for the bridesmaids and groomsmen than wild cheering. Todd gained his first glimpse of Susan Loserio when she was introduced. It was clear that she felt she was the show as she walked hand-in-hand with her husband. He had been in a few meetings with her back in the day and was almost shocked to see her in a dress. The yellow outfit was of a younger style than she probably should have worn but for someone in her fifties, she pulled it off. To Todd's chagrin, the cold, no-nonsense, impervious business side of her had been displaced by something that made her seem more feminine, more of a complicated personality than simply being evil. What he wanted was for the issue to be black and white; he did not want any sort of humanity to emanate from her that would make it harder for him to carry out his scheme.

Todd waited for the bride and groom to make their entrance. He didn't know anything about the groom but assumed he came from money as well. He couldn't imagine Susan Loserio allowing her daughter to marry below her station. The bride radiated happiness as the new husband and wife were introduced and, for a moment, Todd wanted everything about this day to be perfect for her. Then he remembered the reason he was here. What he needed to do was embarrass Loserio without ruining the daughter's day.

The cake, which had five tiers, had just been cut and the bride and groom fed each other without getting a smidgen of icing on themselves. Everyone clapped and returned to their seats to get a piece of the dessert. Todd knew his moment was at hand because he felt that once the dancing started his window of opportunity would be gone. He went into the back and placed another dozen glasses of Cabernet Sauvignon on his tray and, instead of slowly circulating amongst the revelers, he methodically made his way toward Susan Loserio. Once he had seen her in the yellow dress she was fairly easy to spot in the crowd. He stopped when he was about twenty feet from her and took a deep breath.

“Sorry,” he said to a man who reached for a glass. “This is a special delivery.”

When he was approximately five feet away, Todd closed his eyes, took a deep breath and focused. It was a different feeling than when he was The Avenger. The mindset he carried as The Avenger allowed him to perform in a way that made these circumstances more difficult, for now he was acting as Todd. With no one between him and his target – who had her back to him – Todd pretended to trip on something and said ‘oops’ in a loud voice. Susan Loserio turned to the sound just as twelve glasses of wine flew through the air toward her. She raised her hands in a measure of self-defense, as all but a few drops of the three-bottles-worth of wine splashed across her. Todd covered his face as best he could to avoid the shards of glass that caromed off the floor. He stood to see Loserio staring at him, mouth open and eyes filled with rage.

“You idiot,” she said

“Sorry, ma’am,” he said. He could tell that she didn’t recognize him, not that she would expect to see one of her former senior financial analysts serving wine at her daughter’s wedding reception.

He surveyed the damage and to his delight saw that what had been a yellow

dress now carried a deep red stain. The fabric now clung to her in a way that made him appreciate how well the dress had previously flattered her figure. Todd was almost overwhelmed by the silence that had taken over the room until slowly, two waves of sound began to compete for attention: the first was exclamations of shock and the second, audible although not as prevalent, was the sound of laughter. Loserio looked around as the other 499 people all had their eyes focused on her. Todd watched as the look of self-confidence that she had always carried disappeared in a crush of embarrassment. Todd knew that she had wanted all eyes on her this evening, but not in this way. She looked back at Todd and pointed at him.

“I’ll have you fired for this.”

“Try to be original,” he said. “You’ve already done that once.”

He picked up the tray and made his way to the back. He intentionally passed the bride and felt the need to apologize.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “Try to enjoy the rest of the party, I hadn’t meant to ruin your day.”

With that he tossed the tray in the back and walked out the door toward his car. His five-year-old Chevy sedan did not fit in with the abundance of BMWs, Mercedes, Saabs, and monstrous SUVs that filled the lot. Most of these vehicles had likely cost more than he had made in a year. The wealth that was wasted on unnecessary accoutrements never failed to amaze him. He started his car and smiled as he visualized the ‘defeated’ Susan Loserio. Ruining her evening would not get him his job back, or even have a lasting impact, but at least in some small way he had gotten to her. She had to have been humiliated on what was likely the most important social event she would have this year. For one evening the world did not offer its sweet caress to Ms. Loserio. His good mood did not last for long, however, and by the time he was halfway home he asked himself if he was satisfied.

Todd turned on the living room light in his apartment and didn't even bother to change clothes before he collapsed onto the couch. His early euphoria had long since vanished and the moment he had dreamed of for so long – the public humiliation of Susan Loserio – had retreated amid a scent of failure. For some reason he now felt as if he – and The Avenger – had missed his chance. Was it that he had wanted it so bad, he wondered? Could it be that the actual event could not begin to hold up to its promise? All he felt now was an emptiness that made him curl himself up. You think the body is made of more solid stuff, Todd thought, but nothing collapses the limbs like the disappointed exhalation of air: a sigh, an acknowledgement that the world is not what you want it to be. The frame shrivels so much that he thought that – like a map – if he could just find the right lines to fold, a person could be made to fit inside a glove compartment. He wondered if the reason for the emptiness he felt was because he had acted as Todd, not as The Avenger. Did it matter under which guise he performed? Maybe The Avenger would have gone further. Maybe he had made the issue so personal that no amount of humiliation would have been satisfying.

The question that kept returning, no matter how hard he tried to keep it secluded from his thoughts, was: what next? He couldn't go back to the fun capers of the recent past. Eddie proved that he didn't have what it took to infiltrate the criminal world. He felt impotent and, as much as he harped on Matt about the subject, it was now Todd who felt he had missed out on an important opportunity.

The very real fact that he needed to find a job drove Todd to set aside thoughts of The Avenger. The reception had only occurred a few days ago but it already seemed like part of his distant past. Now that his severance had been cut off, the limited savings he had in the bank, along with his depreciated stock portfolio, told him that he

wouldn't be able to pay his bills for more than another two or three months without income coming in. In a worst-case scenario he could always move in with Matt, but a lot of pride would have to be swallowed for Todd to broach that subject. He scoured the Sunday help-wanted ads in the newspaper and found nothing in the accounting field other than entry-level. The Internet job sites weren't much better. It wasn't that long ago when he could have had his pick of a dozen jobs, and likely would have received a boatload of options or some other bonus just for signing on, but in the current economy companies were still downsizing, not hiring. It seemed that at least once a week a local company announced more layoffs. He had called George to see if he had any leads but the situation was the same for him. George told him that out of the eight people in their old group to have been let go, only two had found a new job, and both of them had to take a step back down the career ladder. At least he had unemployment money coming in for a few more months, which reminded him that he needed to file his weekly paperwork.

Todd finished his business at the unemployment office and stood outside the building contemplating his afternoon. The thought of a beer pleased him but the idea of going back to Junior's bar was not appealing. Chances were, though, that Eddie would not be there, and hopefully Junior knew nothing of what had happened. He had told Todd a couple of times that he didn't get involved in his customers' private lives. What the hell, Todd thought, might as well face down a fear.

He opened the door and let his eyes become adjusted to the darkness before he moved toward the bar. He leaned against the brass railing and waited for Junior to amble over.

"Can I get a bottle of Molson and a well-done burger?"

Junior didn't respond, he just placed the beer in front of Todd and yelled the order to the cook. Todd took a few sips and listened to the Sinatra song playing on the jukebox. It was comforting in a way that made him better understand how a person could come here for the feeling of consistency. If you were older, the music was from your youth and reminded you of hopefully good times. If you were younger, you could – as Todd did now – feel a sense of continuity with the past. Either way, it was a chance to forget about whatever might be troubling you in the present.

Junior didn't come Todd's way again until he brought the food. He set the plate in front of Todd and opened another bottle of beer for him. The bartender started to walk away and then stopped to give his attention to Todd.

"I'm surprised to see you here," he said.

Todd paused in mid-bite and felt a blush of embarrassment swoop over his face and neck.

"I take it Eddie told you about our meeting?"

"Eddie didn't tell me nothing. But I heard he got busted the other day. I figured you would have been involved."

"Nope. Things didn't work out with us. Do you know what happened to him?"

"What I heard was someone he thought was a fence was really an undercover cop. You're lucky you didn't get caught up."

Todd was touched that Junior actually appeared concerned about his welfare. And he was tickled that Eddie had gotten arrested. Maybe The Avenger wasn't needed as much as he thought.

"I'd stay away from here for awhile, though," Junior said.

"Why?"

"I don't know what happened between you and Eddie, but if he got arrested not long after you two had an argument or whatever, then he might blame you somehow."

“But I had nothing to do with it,” Todd said.

“That might be the case, but Eddie don’t know that. That guy’s got a temper and if he’s out on bail then I would watch my back.”

Junior walked to the other end of the bar to wait on a customer that just came in. Todd ate his burger in silence and thought about what Junior had said. He wondered if Eddie had any idea who he was. Todd could not remember ever introducing himself and he had called Eddie from the payphone, so he believed he should be safe. Then he remembered that money had been taken out of his wallet. Would Eddie have bothered to look for identification? And what about the possibility that he had taken one of The Avenger’s business cards? Both thoughts were unsettling. He found Junior’s advice sound; he would stay away from here from now on. He finished his meal and waited until Junior got off the phone so he could get his attention, pay his bill and put this place behind him.

“Thanks for the update,” Todd said. “I think I’ll concentrate on finding a real job, so chances are I won’t be back.”

“Whatever,” Junior said.

Todd left the bar, taking a quick look around to see if Eddie was lurking nearby. Maybe Matt had it right, he thought. Maybe boring was the way to go. The sun was shining and Todd put on his sunglasses, rolled the car window down and drove home. Tomorrow he would update his résumé and look into the career development services that the government offered through the unemployment office. He turned into his apartment complex and found a parking spot in front of his building. As he unlocked the security door leading in, he heard a car horn behind him. He rotated his upper body to look behind him and saw Eddie’s car idling behind his. He watched as Eddie got out of his car and leaned on the hood.

“Just wanted to see where you lived,” Eddie said. “You didn’t put your address

on this card.” Eddie held up what Todd knew to be an Avenger business card. “Maybe I’ll stop by for a drink one of these days and we can talk about how bad you want to keep this little secret.”

Eddie laughed as he got back in the car and then spun the tires as he drove away. Todd couldn’t move. He watched Eddie drive out of the complex and head back to wherever it was he came from. Eddie must have been watching for him to come out of the bar and then followed him. Junior had warned him to be careful and now he was screwed. He knew that Eddie was dangerous and more than a little mentally unstable. His knee ached as he remembered the earlier incident with the gun.

“Is everything all right?”

“Huh?” Todd looked to see Elsa, an older German woman who lived in his building, looking at him from where the mail slots were, right inside the door.

“You are as pale as a ghost,” she said.

“I think I just saw one,” Todd said.

He opened his mailbox and grabbed the magazine, catalog, and couple of bills that waited for him. What to do, what to do, he kept asking himself. His immediate response was that he had to move. But it would take days or weeks to find a new place, not to mention he would have to pay out the wazoo if he broke his lease, which still had seven months to go. And if Eddie did keep a close eye on him then he would see what was going on. The best option he had, the one he swore he would never use, was to move into Matt’s house for a spell. He could grab some clothes and a few other things he needed and hide out until he figured out what to do. Matt would ask questions but Todd knew he could bluff his way through them. The big question Todd had was how angry was Eddie? Did he really think that Todd had somehow tipped off the police and that was the reason he got arrested? If so, then he might want some kind of revenge. It was ironic, Todd thought, that The Avenger was himself being avenged. He also

figured that Eddie would want to either blackmail him or sell his secret to get some money. Maybe he should go on the offensive. If so, what he needed to do was find out who Eddie was. He wouldn't ask Junior – there was no way he was going back to that bar – so the only way he could think of discovering Eddie's last name was through Karen. Since Eddie had recently been arrested, as the police reporter she might have access to his last name and current address. He tried her at work but got her voice mail. He hung up without leaving a message and called her at home.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Karen, it's Todd. Is this a bad time?”

“No. What's going on?”

“I need a favor.”

“Sure.”

“You have access to the list of people who get arrested, don't you? What's it called, the police blotter?”

“Yeah, we get a listing each week of the arrests in the city. It's a little more work to get the ones from the suburbs. What are you looking for?”

Good question, Todd thought. He hadn't figured out a rationale for why he would need to know Eddie's name.

“It's kind of hard to explain,” he said. “But I heard that this guy I met named Eddie was arrested recently for trying to sell stolen merchandise. I need to get a hold of him but I don't know his last name.”

“How are you involved in this? You're not in trouble, are you?”

“No. I'm not really involved. I had met him at a bar and . . .” Todd didn't know what to say. “Listen,” he said. “I can't really explain it but trust me that I'm not in any sort of trouble or doing anything illegal, OK?”

“Okay. Should I be worried about you?”

"No." Todd hoped that he sounded more confident than he felt.

"I'm heading to work in a few minutes. I'll check the files when I get there and give you a call. Are you sure everything's all right?"

"Yeah. But Karen, please don't tell Matt about this. I don't want him harassing me."

"I won't say anything. Give me an hour or so and I'll let you know what I find out. First name was Eddie, right?"

"Yup. Thanks."

Todd hung up and turned the television on. He could kill an hour flipping through the cable channels. He watched the end of a cooking show and then became engrossed in a movie that had been popular when he was in high school. He remembered how relevant it had seemed at the time and, even though he understood now that it wasn't the highest quality of movies, it made him feel that he was sixteen again. He almost felt disappointed when the phone rang and he had to tear his attention away from the screen.

"Well," Karen said. "You certainly know how to pick your friends."

"Why? Did you find out who he was?"

"How old would you say this Eddie is?"

"Maybe mid- to late-twenties," Todd said.

"OK," Karen said "Here goes. Edward Reilly, age 28, last known address, 28A Delaware St. Arrested for possession of stolen property with intent to sell."

"Sounds like him," Todd said. He wrote down the address on a scrap of paper.

"Wait, there's more. I made a call and it turns out your friend Eddie has spent a total of nearly three years in jail over two stretches for armed robbery and aggravated assault. He doesn't sound like someone I would want to be friends with."

"Hopefully I'll only be seeing him one more time," Todd said.

“Be careful, Todd”

“I will.”

Todd thanked her and hung up. I’ll be careful, he thought, but The Avenger might have to put himself into a tough spot one more time.

11

It was hot for the middle of May but the infield had not yet become the baked surface it would be by summer's end. Softball season was upon him and Matt felt the mixture of giddiness and nerves that always hit him before the first game. Even though he had been playing for years, he knew the fear of failure would be present until he had tallied his first hit and successfully fielded his first ground ball. The team was comprised of mostly newsroom personnel supplemented with a few spouses. Matt had been on this team for the past three years, playing when his work schedule allowed. He had recently made the transition from shortstop to second base, a move forced by the hire into the Features department of Tracey, a young female reporter who had played softball in college. It was a humbling reminder of his encroaching middle age that not only was he asked to change positions to allow for a more nimble teammate, but that his successor was of the opposite sex.

Matt loosened up by playing catch with Karen. He would have liked to have had a different partner – someone that he could have thrown harder to – but she asked and who was he to turn her down? Their team was designated the home team and thus in the field first. Matt jogged out to his position and took a deep breath, awaiting the

start of another season. The first batter hit a chopper over the pitcher's head that Tracey fielded in front of second base before throwing out the runner. Matt had to drop to the ground to avoid Tracey's throw and he quickly understood that the position switch had been the right move, since he knew he wouldn't have reached the ball if he had been playing short.

"Hey, Matt," Greg yelled from his position in left-center field. "I guess I'll have a lot less action now that you're not the shortstop."

Matt raised his arm in acknowledgement of the insult and waited for the next batter to step to the plate. After the inning was over, he commented to Tracey on the nice play she had made.

"Thanks," she said. "Sorry if I took your position away."

"It's all about the team," he replied. He was impressed with her attitude and her play, not mention the toned legs that she never displayed at work that now were in plain view beneath the spandex jogging shorts that she wore for the game.

Two innings later Matt watched as Karen stepped into the batter's box. She was not a natural athlete and had been made the team's catcher. Last year was the first time she had played and Matt objectively considered her the worst player on the team. She took a couple of practice swings and then stared at the pitcher. Karen swung at the first pitch and looped the ball barely over the outstretched glove of the first baseman for a single. When she reached first she jumped up and down and waved her arms.

"Oh, great," Greg said. "The queen got a hit. I'm sure she'll be bragging about that later at the bar."

Matt looked at the reporter in surprise. He had always thought Greg liked Karen, and considered him a rival of sorts for her affection, but something had

obviously changed. Matt must have had an odd look on his face because Greg felt the need to explain.

“Don’t be so shocked, Matt. Your little princess has been quite uppity lately. I’m surprised she deigned it possible to mingle with us commoners today.”

“I haven’t noticed anything different,” Matt said.

“No shock there. You think she’s God’s gift to the world, but her ego has really kicked in since our exalted Catherine anointed her the chosen one for her coverage of The Avenger. If I were you, I would spend more time paying attention to your double-play partner.”

“Tracey? Why?”

Greg flexed his fingers inside his batter’s glove, apparently getting bored with the conversation. “Matt, I know you’ve been mooning over Karen for years, but for some unknown reason, it appears that Tracey might be smitten with you.”

“I doubt that,” Matt said.

The next batter hit a ground ball to third base and Karen was forced out at second. She trotted back to the bench and was still grinning from her hit. Matt noticed that Greg and a few other reporters stealthily moved away from where she sat down next to him.

“Am I good, or what?” she said.

“Very impressive,” Matt said. “Was that your one hit for the year?”

“Ooh, copy boy is getting cocky.” She turned to look at the rest of the players around her. “Is it me or is team spirit lacking a bit this year?”

“Give ‘em time, it’s only the first game.” He also looked around and wondered how widespread Greg’s perception of Karen was.

Matt stepped into the batter's box and watched the first pitch drop in for a strike. He always forced himself to wait for one strike to be called before he swung so he didn't lunge at the first offering. The next pitch was a ball and Matt stepped away from the plate to survey the field. He noticed the left fielder playing off the line and decided that if he saw an inside pitch he would try to pull it over the third baseman's head. He waited as another strike was called in a location he didn't like. The fourth pitch was the ball Matt had waited for and he opened his hips quicker than normal and ripped the ball down the line. As he ran, he thought again that with the best hits it barely felt like you hit the ball, as opposed to the miss-hits, which could sting like hell. As he rounded first, he saw the left fielder was just about to reach the ball. Matt calculated that the guy would have to backhand the ball and make a perfect throw to get him out, so Matt tried to stretch it into a double. A few steps from second, Matt realized that the outfielder had indeed made a good play and he was going to be out if the second baseman held onto the throw and made the tag. Matt slid hard into the base, but was called out. He was the third out of the inning, so he slowly dusted himself off and waited near the base as Tracey brought his glove out to him.

"Thanks," he said. "I didn't think he could make that play."

"I'm thinking a couple, three years ago you would have been safe," she said.

"Maybe so," he answered. He watched her jog over to talk to the third baseman and kept staring until the first baseman yelled to get his attention.

Matt surveyed the scene: three tables pulled together in the bar that sponsored the team; pitchers of beer spread around and half the team eating Buffalo chicken wings while discussing the game. Now this was what playing softball was all about. The bar area was crowded but a side room held all of the tables. At the far end of the room was

a pool table and two dartboards; one electronic and one that took real darts. Several TVs were spread around the bar and dining area and they were all tuned to either a basketball or hockey game. Every few minutes a cheer or groan could be heard, depending on the action. The Stone Pig had been sponsoring the team for a few years now and Matt felt comfortable here. The beer selection had increased to about twenty brands on tap and the food was simple yet good. At this hour on a Sunday there was enough room to move a few tables together and spread out. Karen sat on one side of him but his gaze more and more drifted toward Tracey, who luckily enough sat across from him. A couple of times he caught Tracey looking at him and he wondered if what Greg had said was true. Matt would have liked to believe it, but Greg had never done him any favors in the past, not to mention that not too long ago Matt thought him interested in Karen. He looked at Tracey. She was a woman who liked to laugh, and not simply a middling chuckle; she laughed so hard that no sound dared exit her mouth. She was a different person in this atmosphere than she was at work, but he supposed most people were like that. Not that he had gone out of his way to get to know her, the Features department was at the other end of the newsroom from the copy desk and he rarely had reason to visit those folks. Karen interrupted his reverie when she elbowed him.

“What?” he asked.

“Be careful that you don’t drool,” she said.

He was about to respond when he heard Greg begin his depiction of Matt getting thrown out. Greg stood up and was pantomiming how slow Matt ran, complete with strained facial gestures and theatrical arm pumping. Matt took it in good humor; after all, this was part of the bonding experience. He was starting to think that Greg wasn’t that bad of a guy. After draining his glass of beer he left the table to go to the bathroom. On his way back he passed Tracey. Matt couldn’t help but wonder if she had tried to time it so they would meet. The passageway to the bathrooms was narrow, so

in order for two people to pass they would both have to turn sideways. Tracey stood straight on, blocking his path.

“You had a nice game today,” she said.

“Thanks.” Matt had had four hits in five at bats. “It’s fun to get out and run around for an hour or two.” He thought that sounded lame, but he wasn’t sure where this was going.

“So, Matt,” Tracey said. “Next Friday there’s a good blues band playing at this club I know about. Any interest in going?”

“I’d love to, but I have to work.”

“Oh, OK.”

They stood awkwardly for a moment and Matt told himself to say something else, anything to break the awkwardness he felt. Then he saw Tracey look him in the eye before she suddenly dropped her head, excused herself and made her way to the ladies room. He sat down next to Karen and re-filled his glass.

“That was interesting,” he said to her. At first he wasn’t sure if he should say anything to Karen about this, but then he thought it might offer a clue as to how she felt about him.

“What?”

“Tracey just asked me if I wanted to go see a band next Friday.”

“What did you say?”

“I told her I had to work.”

“Anything else?” Karen asked.

“No, what do you mean?”

She punched him in the shoulder. “You moron, you should have asked her to go out some other time. She was leaving you an opening.”

Matt was about to respond when Tracey sat back down. He looked at her but

she wouldn't make eye contact. He watched as she acted fidgety and almost embarrassed. Now he felt bad that he had told Karen. Matt thought about what Karen had said; was Tracey expecting him to ask her out? But his bigger dilemma was the one that was sitting next to him. Karen was the one he wanted to go out with, yet she was pushing him to ask Tracey out. Did that mean she had no interest in him? Damn, he felt like he was sixteen again, but here he was, more than twice as old as that and he still couldn't figure out girls. After a few half-hearted attempts to join the talk, Tracey finally announced her intentions to leave. She said her good-byes and threw Matt a quick glance.

"See ya later," was all he could muster. He watched her walk out the door and wondered if, yet again, he had failed to act on a chance.

"You should follow her and ask her out," Karen said.

"It's too late," Matt said.

"It is not. You know where she parked – you could get to her car before she leaves."

"I don't know," Matt said. Then he wondered about Karen's motives. "Why are you so interested in me asking Tracey out?" He tried to keep his voice low so the others wouldn't hear.

"Well, it appears that like she likes you, she's cute and she's seems nice. That's a pretty good combination."

You're cute, you're nice, Matt thought, but you don't like me in that way, do you? Maybe he had been fooling himself thinking that he and Karen would eventually be together. But although Tracey was interesting to ponder, he knew he couldn't pursue that line of thought until he was reconciled that nothing would happen with Karen. And he would never be reconciled unless he pushed the issue. He looked at her and thought that even in a baseball hat she looked good. He closed his eyes and took a

deep, cleansing breath, almost unable to believe that he was about to do this.

“Karen?” he said.

“Hold that thought,” she said. “I really have to pee.”

She left the table and Matt was left with his mouth agape. He felt deflated, as if he had puffed himself up like a balloon to allow him to ask her out and now he flittered through the sky because the air had rushed out of him.

“She has been such a bitch lately,” a female voice at the end of the table said.

Matt couldn’t say for sure who had spoken the words.

“Don’t worry,” Greg said. “This whole Avenger thing has slowed down and that’s the train she’s been riding. Once that story goes away she’ll be back to the same mediocre police beat writer she’s always been.”

“I hate her attitude, though,” said Alicia, a general assignment reporter who Matt figured out must have been the one speaking earlier. “She thinks she’s the bomb just because something big happened on her beat. All she’s doing is reporting what the police tell her anyway.”

Matt wanted to say something, to defend Karen, to say she was a good person, that the rest of them didn’t know her like he did, but no words would exit his mouth. He thought Greg had been exaggerating earlier when he complained about Karen; Matt didn’t realize that others were apparently disenchanted with her as well. Greg looked like he was about to say something else but then closed his mouth. Matt could feel Karen’s presence behind him before she sat down.

“Hey,” she said to Matt, “did I miss anything?”

Oh,” he lied, “I wasn’t really paying attention.”

The smaller conversations continued around the table but Matt could still sense the anger in the air. He had a hard time believing that Karen was treating people in a way to make them attack her. He wondered how much of it was professional jealousy

and how much was deserved. Every reporter at the paper needed to carry a high level of competitiveness, otherwise it would be hard to dig for stories, to beat out the TV stations who wanted the same information, to get the scoop that broke a story. They all considered themselves at least Karen's equal, if not better.

"Hey, Greg," Karen called down to the other end of the table. "Did I tell you what Catherine said to me yesterday?"

"Why, no, Karen, what did our exalted leader share with you?"

Please don't say anything stupid, Matt thought.

"She said that one of the network news shows called her asking which reporter they could talk to about The Avenger. I could be on TV."

Matt wanted her to take the words back but it was too late. If only she could have sensed the resentment toward her she might have chosen to not bring the subject up.

"Karen," Alicia said. "I think I speak for most of the table when I say, shut the hell up."

Matt looked at his friend's stunned expression. Karen looked as she might have the first time she realized there was no Santa Claus. She turned from face to face at the table; some of them stared right back, others had dropped their eyes and concentrated on their beer glass, or plate of food or some other object on the table that suddenly required their attention. The spouses and friends appeared more confused than anything, as they found themselves in the middle of workplace politics that they couldn't understand. Karen then looked at Matt, who had no answer ready for her. All he could think to do was put his hand on her knee and give a little squeeze. Matt thought she looked as if she might cry but then she stood up, grabbed her purse and walked out of the bar.

"See ya," someone said.

Matt waited about three heartbeats before tossing a twenty from his wallet onto the table. He then left to chase after Karen. He didn't care what the others thought of him at that moment; if Greg considered him a puppy dog following Karen around then he was sure others did as well, but no matter how she may have acted recently, Karen was still a person with bruised feelings. He pushed open the door, took a couple of steps outside and stood there, trying to figure out where she might have gone. He checked the little parking area on the side of the bar but she wasn't there. He looked along the busy street the bar was situated on but couldn't see her anywhere. She must have parked close to have been able to leave this quickly. He stood on the sidewalk and pondered his next move. He could drive to her apartment, but would she be in the mood to see him? He decided the best thing to do would be to go home and try calling her. That might give her time to calm down and rationally be able to talk about what happened. Matt knew he owed it to her to explain the rationale of the other reporters. She obviously didn't know how she had been coming across and maybe she would be able to apologize in some way and salvage the friendships she had hurt.

The sun was beginning to set as Matt approached his house. He noticed that at least one light was blazing – it looked like it was in the kitchen – and he was positive he hadn't left any on. Then he saw Todd's car in the driveway. Now he remembered: When he had first bought the house he had supplied Todd with a key, just so someone else had one in case he locked himself out. Todd had never simply come over and made himself at home, so naturally Matt was curious as to the reason behind the visit. On the other hand, all he wanted to do was take a shower and then call Karen. Not that he wouldn't listen, but he hoped that Todd wasn't having some sort of crisis. He entered the house, tossed his keys on the kitchen table, took off his sneakers and walked into

the living room to see Todd positioned in the recliner watching TV.

"Hey," his brother said without looking up.

"What's going on?" Matt asked.

Todd shrugged. "Did you win?" he asked.

"No, we lost by four."

Todd didn't offer anything else and Matt didn't ask. He was happy to see that apparently Todd hadn't been drinking. He told Todd that he was going to jump in the shower and to make himself at home. That last comment was attempted sarcasm but Todd did not even acknowledge it. Matt looked at his brother for a few more seconds and then turned and went to the shower. He could barely see his brother now without thinking about his mother and her affair. He still couldn't believe she had done that but, for better or for worse, Todd wouldn't be here now if she had been faithful. His parents might have had another child, and they might have named it Todd if it had been a boy, but it wouldn't have been the same Todd.

After showering and changing, Matt came back to the living room and sat on the couch. He tried to watch the movie that Todd had on but he had never been a big movie fan, especially walking in halfway through one. He wanted to know why his brother was here and it looked as if Todd wasn't going to volunteer the information.

"So," Matt said. "What's up?"

"I needed to get out of the apartment for a little while," Todd said. He waited a couple of seconds and then added, "Mind if I stay here for a few days?"

"Not at all," Matt said. "Any particular reason?"

"Nothing I want to get into right now. Let's just say I need a change of scenery."

"Fair enough," Matt said, although he didn't find Todd's answer very fair. Not that he wouldn't let his brother stay any time he needed, but some sort of explanation

would be nice. Then he remembered Karen. "Listen," he said. "I'll be back in a second, I've got to make a phone call."

"Whatever," Todd said.

Matt went upstairs to use the extension in his bedroom. He felt like he was teenager again, back when he couldn't talk to a girl on the phone if he thought anyone else was listening. He punched in Karen's number, hoping she wasn't too angry to answer the phone.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hey, Karen." He planned on asking how she was but before he could say anything more she interrupted.

"What the hell was that all about?"

"That's why I'm calling," Matt said.

"Well?"

Matt could picture her, hand on her hip, jaw stuck out in defiance. "Apparently there is a little animosity built up toward you." Matt wasn't sure how to explain, so he figured the best way would be to throw it out there. "Some of the others seem to think that you've become a little bit of a prima donna." Karen didn't say anything and Matt couldn't tell if it was because she was shocked or angry. Either way, he felt the need to rush in and fill the silence. "A few of the reporters think this whole Avenger thing has gone to your head and that you think you're better than they are. On the whole, they find you a little condescending." Matt surprised himself – that had been a harsher explanation than he had intended.

"They really think that?" she said. "Did they tell you that?" Her voice was softer now, almost vulnerable.

"I heard a couple of random comments earlier today. Before that I had no clue."

"But you've never paid attention to the office politics," Karen said. "They've

probably felt this way for awhile. God, I thought Alicia was my friend.”

“I’m sure she is,” Matt said. “That’s probably why she felt like she had to say something.”

“Oh, I don’t think we’ll be friends anymore. And Greg, too. What did I do to him? You don’t feel that way, do you Matt?”

“You don’t act that way around me, but I don’t see you around the other reporters much.”

“You *do* believe them. Un-fucking-believable.”

“I’m not saying that,” Matt said. He tried to back-pedal out of the stickiness he found himself in. All he had wanted to do was see if she was OK and now he was being accused of stabbing her in the back. “All I’m saying is that maybe, unconsciously, maybe even jokingly, you’ve been acting a little different lately.”

“I don’t know, maybe I have been a little cocky. But I haven’t meant it to be mean.”

Matt could imagine her pacing around her apartment, running her fingers through her hair. He should have followed her to her apartment. It was easier to comfort someone in person than over the phone. He could have held her as she cried. He could have stared into her pleading eyes and convinced her he would always be there for her.

“Well,” she said, and Matt thought he heard a little snuffle, “they won’t be able to accuse me of anything for very long if The Avenger doesn’t get off his ass and do something.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s fairly simple, Matt. No Avenger, no story. No story, no glory. No glory, no reason for Karen to act like she’s the second-coming, *if* that’s how I’ve been acting.”

"It has been awhile since he's done anything, hasn't it?"

"Too long," Karen said. "Catherine warned me yesterday that if something didn't happen soon then she was pulling the plug on the special feature. Do you know how much work I've put into that?"

"I know." He didn't really know but he knew what it meant to her.

"It would kill me if he just faded away into oblivion. My career can't afford a slow leak; if The Avenger does go away I need him to have a blowout."

"That's an interesting analogy."

"You know what I mean. I know he's not done yet, I can just feel it."

"I hope you're right," Matt said. At this point he knew she just needed to vent and wasn't expecting him to contribute.

"Matt," she said, switching to a voice as warm and inviting as a favorite shirt just out of the dryer. "Thanks for talking to me. I really appreciate it. It's nice to know I can still count on having one friend."

"Not a big deal," he said.

"It was a big deal. Maybe this was something I needed to hear and I'm glad you had the nerve to call. Are you working tomorrow night?"

"No."

"Let me take you out to dinner."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know I don't have to, I want to."

"I won't stop you."

Matt finished the call and was in his glory. He had done the right thing and was now being rewarded for it. He nearly floated down the stairs until he was quickly reminded that Todd was in the house.

"And how is Karen?" his brother asked.

“Were you listening?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. Who else would you sneak away to call?”

Matt sat on the couch. His brother sure knew him. The only reason he would have gone upstairs to make a call was to have some privacy, which likely meant talking to a girl. Tracey’s image popped into his head and he realized that this was the first time he had thought of her since Karen stormed out of the bar. Why consider Option 2 if Option 1 was more viable than ever, he thought?

“Karen had a rough day,” he finally said to Todd.

“Did she strike out?”

“No, it had nothing to do with softball. Some of the other reporters think she’s become a little too cocky at work lately because of the hoopla over The Avenger coverage.”

For the first time since Matt came home, Todd looked at him. “Can I tell you how sick I am of hearing about The Avenger?” he said.

“From the sounds of it you won’t have to hear about him much longer.”

“And why is that?”

Matt thought that Todd looked amused. “Karen said that the paper might stop writing about him since he hasn’t done anything lately,” he said. “She’s pretty upset about it considering she thought he was going to be her big break.”

“So let me get this straight. Karen’s career advancement depends on The Avenger becoming more active?”

“I guess if you want to take that line of logic, then yes, The Avenger’s silence is definitely hurting Karen.” Matt waited for Todd to say more, but his brother’s demeanor developed an air of inevitability.

“Unbelievable,” Todd said. Then he rose from the chair and headed toward the kitchen. “Don’t bother waiting up.”

“Where are you going?” Matt asked.

“I’m not twelve anymore and you are not my parent,” Todd said. “But since you are doing me the favor of letting me crash with you for awhile, I’ll say that before finding a new job and getting on with my life, I have a few items of unfinished business to take care of.”

Matt heard the back door shut and saw Todd’s shadow move past the window. He wanted to feel concern for Todd – whatever unfinished business he had must be connected with his staying at the house – but hopes for a romantic dinner with Karen had pushed all other thoughts aside.

12

Karen was at her desk when the news came across the police scanner: man found dead in city apartment from a gunshot wound. The address of Delaware Street sounded familiar but she couldn't bring it to mind. She didn't have to be at work tonight, but after the softball game and then talking to Matt, she didn't feel like sitting in her apartment. Her hope was to work on The Avenger piece but this killing obviously took precedence. She found it hard to sit among reporters who had recently and openly dissed her and she felt their eyes bore into her back. Karen didn't know if she should apologize or ignore them. It might seem callous, but at least this death allowed her to avoid making that decision for an hour or two.

She arrived at the crime scene, which was in one of the worst neighborhoods in the city. Much of the block had been lost to abandonment or suspected drug houses. Fifty years ago it had been considered a nice part of the city, but now Karen thought it should be bulldozed and started over. The reverberation of rap music came from one of the houses; the heavy bass making Karen nod her head to the beat. She sought out whomever was in charge; unfortunately, it appeared to be Detective Simmons. She took a deep breath and approached him.

"Hello, Detective."

"Karen," he said in acknowledgement. "Always a pleasure to see you, even under these circumstances. Having a good weekend?"

"Better than this guy, I suppose." She wasn't about to get into her newsroom situation with this lout.

"Well it could be your lucky day. The dearly departed was a small time punk – someone that we had hoped would lead us to bigger and better things."

"Why is that lucky for me?"

"Because of this." He showed her a sealed evidence bag that contained one of The Avenger's business cards.

"Get out. The Avenger did this?"

"We're not sure. This is so against his usual methods that we don't want to assume anything."

Karen felt a crush of disappointment. She had prayed for another appearance by The Avenger but she did not want to think him a murderer. This was a whole new level that would firmly push him into the criminal category.

"We're not ready to announce his potential involvement," Simmons said. "You can do what you want with your story, but it could be a case of someone trying to be a copycat."

"The card sure looks real," Karen said.

"It does," Simmons said. "But you don't know how many of these could be floating around out there. They're not that complicated to make on a computer, so all someone had to do was see the original, and you guys have printed a picture of one in the paper before."

"A couple of times, I think," Karen agreed. A TV crew had shown up and other members of police were trying to get Simmons' attention. Karen had the basic facts for

her story, other than the recently deceased's name. "Any idea who he was?" she asked.

"We know his identity, but we won't release it until we have notified his next of kin."

"Business as usual. OK, thanks for your help, Detective." She was pleasantly surprised at how professional he was, compared to his normal lecherous behavior. Maybe being the man in charge suited him.

"Remember, you can do what you want as far as The Avenger goes," Simmons said. "But we're not ready to identify this as his handiwork."

During her ride back to the office Karen struggled with how to write the story. By the time she walked up the sloped entranceway to the newsroom she decided that as it stood – with no identity and no police confirmation of The Avenger's presence – she would treat it as a small news brief, just a paragraph or two for the cover of the Local section. She filed the story and waited a few minutes to see if there were any questions. As she readied to leave, the TV news began and the teaser was about the death. Her curiosity piqued, Karen decided to wait and see how the station covered the story. When they came back from the commercial break, Karen was devastated to see the logo the station had created for its Avenger coverage plastered on the screen. They had obviously taken the angle that The Avenger was behind the death. She thought their decision unprofessional – after all, the police had not said that The Avenger was responsible but now the viewing public would think so. And worse, people might think she dropped the ball by not reporting the same information. She shook her head and started to walk out of the newsroom when she heard Alan's booming voice.

"Karen. Do not leave."

She turned to watch as her editor ran toward her, catching the attention of the rest of the staff.

"I just got off the phone with Catherine. She wants The Avenger story on 1A

tomorrow. I need you to rework it.”

“Alan,” she whined. “We don’t know if there is an Avenger story. According to the police, it could be a copycat kind of crime. It doesn’t follow the typical M.O.”

“So write that then. If it’s all over the television then we’ll look like idiots for not having anything.”

“Isn’t that better than looking like an idiot for following the pack and printing conjecture?” She watched as Alan became visibly angry toward her.

“Karen, listen to me.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “It’s getting late and Catherine wants a story for 1A. I’m asking you to write it, unless you want me to take you off of this beat.”

“Don’t act the tough guy, Alan, it’s not you.” She started to walk back to her desk but then stopped and looked at Alan. “I’ll write your goddamned story, but it’s a sad day for journalism when we bypass the facts because of what television does.”

“Don’t act so pious. Our job is to sell papers. And besides, it’s not like *you’re* The Avenger. All you do is write about what he’s already done.”

Karen knew that as she stood there, the eyes of her fellow newsroom employees were upon her, some of them for the second time that day. She couldn’t think of anything other than ‘fuck you’ to say, so she stayed silent and stormed to her desk. Why was everyone turning against her? And this was a case where she was *not* trying to cash in on The Avenger. This was what she had been willing to sacrifice relationships and future family for? She whipped off the story in about twenty minutes and waited for Alan to take the first swing of editing it. Ten minutes later he came over to where she sat and crouched beside her.

“Nice job,” he said. “Thank you.”

“I had always thought you were on my side,” Karen said, staring at her blank screen. She didn’t want to look at him.

“Trust me, I am. What do you think would have happened if Catherine woke up tomorrow and didn’t see a story? She would have fired both of our asses. And I don’t know about you, but I need this paycheck.”

“It just seems wrong.”

Alan shrugged. “There are many shades of right and wrong,” he said. “What looked wrong yesterday isn’t always wrong today.”

Karen sat there for a few more minutes before she began to walk out of the newsroom for the second time that evening.

What is it that makes us unhappy, Karen wondered? Is it the feeling that you’re alone? Is it not having what you want? She had always thought that if you knew, really knew, what you were after then working toward that was enough to keep most people going. But when she stared at the ceiling of her bedroom for most of the night and tried to figure out, needed to understand, what made her tick, she had a horrible realization: she had lost her identity. Karen thought she knew who she was, but that view had changed with the latest Avenger story. She had been a hard-edged journalist who wouldn’t let anything get in the way of a scoop. Now she had wavered and it scared the crap out of her that she lost that edge and wouldn’t be able to get it back. Was it really journalistic ethics that had tempered her? How could she be an effective reporter if she smelled the blood of a story and ignored it? She could choose to look at it as an isolated event, a one-time occurrence that shouldn’t have a lasting impact on her ability, but now Doubt would be her constant companion. Karen couldn’t bear to stop trusting herself because at this point in time her career was her identity. And she understood how sad of a statement that was.

Tonight was the dinner Karen had promised Matt and they were going to a restaurant near her apartment. He sat in her living room and appeared distracted, yet at the same time he looked at Karen more than normal. She wasn't in the mood for it today. How long, she wondered, was he going to moon over her?

"I need to stretch my legs," she said. "Do you want to walk to the restaurant?"

Matt jumped off the couch. "I'm ready," he said.

Whenever she had the chance, Karen took long walks through her neighborhood. There were so many side streets and little stores and boutiques that she never tired of the views. She could never hope to own a house in this area – the prices were at least two to three times what she could afford – but it kept her feeling young, as this was the area that predominantly single people gravitated toward. The architecture was of an age long gone, when each house had unique characteristics rather than the huge, cookie-cutter castles being built today. They walked with their hands in the front pockets of their jeans and Karen loved the tactile feeling of the breeze that blew directly in their faces. It wasn't a perfect day but Karen needed the fresh air.

"Pretty damn windy, eh?" she said. She hated it when she made obvious statements.

"I'm jealous of the wind," Matt replied.

"Why is that?"

"Because it can touch you and I can't."

That stopped Karen dead in her tracks. She looked over at Matt but he stared at his feet and kept walking.

"What did you say?" Karen screamed at him. Matt ignored her so she ran in front of him and stood in his path. "What did you say?"

"You heard me," he said. He kept his voice at an even level while he still

avoided eye contact.

“Then why don’t you try doing something about it?”

Matt hesitated for only a moment before he bent down, put one hand on each of her shoulders and kissed her on the mouth. Karen didn’t stop him but when he backed away she slapped his face hard enough to make him yelp. Never again did she want to see the look of pain that Matt showed her.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “I DON’T GET IT! You asked me to kiss you and then you hit me.”

“I didn’t ask you to kiss me,” Karen said. “I told you to do something about your feelings. There’s a difference. You’ve been lusting after me for so long but had never followed through with it, and I’m tired of feeling uncomfortable around you. Tired that anything I said would be taken the wrong way and you’d give yourself a glimmer of hope. I want the friend back that I used to have and this was the only way I could think of.”

“You are one whacked person,” he said.

“Matt, I’m not who you think I am.”

“Who do I think you are?” he asked. “This should be great because in all the time I’ve known you I have yet to figure you out.”

Karen hesitated for a second, two at the most before she spoke. “You think I am someone who is fooling herself and the day will come when I discover that you are what will make me happy. Well, write a headline about this story, Bubba. I will never, never, never fall in love with you. You will die a lonely and bitter man if that’s what you are depending on.”

She watched as his expression moved from shock to recognition to shame to anger. He stared at her for another moment and then turned and left. She stood, immobile, and watched him walk away.

“By the way,” she whispered. “What you said was incredibly romantic.”

The following night Karen daydreamed in front of her blank computer screen. She had hit a dead-end with The Avenger story. Either he was a murderer – which would change the entire tone of the package – or he had disappeared – which might kill the story. Either way, she was desperate for something to happen, something that would force her to act rather than think. Her phone rang and she eagerly picked it up to save her from the mental gymnastics she was experiencing.

“Metro Desk, Karen speaking.”

“And how is my favorite reporter this evening?”

“Who is this?” She felt creeped out. She didn’t recognize the voice and images of a stalker sprang to mind. At least the call wasn’t to her home.

“I’m hurt that you don’t know my voice. It’s Hank Simmons.”

Hank Simmons, Karen thought. Do I know a Hank Simmons? Then it came to her – Detective Simmons from the police. At least she knew it wasn’t a stalker, but she still felt uneasy.

“How can I help you, Detective?”

“You have it wrong. It’s about how I can help you.”

“OK.” Karen dragged out the syllables as she tried to figure out why he was calling.

“What time do you get out of work tonight?”

“Haven’t we been through this before?” Karen said. “I do not want to go out with you.” She wondered if she could file some sort of complaint against him with the station.

“Hey,” Simmons said. “Give me a little credit. I have graciously accepted that

fact. This is different. I have some information you may be interested in and thought that maybe I could be a source.”

“What kind of information?”

“Come on, Karen, it can’t be that easy. Meet me at the Delta Club in an hour.”

“I need a little something more than your presence to entice me,” Karen said.

“Throw me a bone, here.”

“Oh, I’ve got a bone for you. Let’s just say that after this latest escapade we’ve had a breakthrough in chasing down The Avenger’s identity.”

“Shut up,” Karen said. “What do you know?”

“I’ll tell you that the victim’s name was Edward Reilly, age 28. To hear about The Avenger, be at The Delta Club – one hour from now,” Simmons said, and then the line went dead.

Karen sat back in her chair and had a million thoughts running through her brain at the same time. One part of her said, ‘this could be it.’ Another part issued her a warning about the motives of Detective Simmons. The Delta Club was about twenty minutes away, located near where the river ran into Lake Ontario, hence the name. At least she had time to decide. Then the name of the deceased struck her like a punch in the gut. Edward Reilly of Delaware Street was the guy Todd had asked about. Was he involved in this? Todd was not a murderer, and besides, The Avenger’s business card was found. She looked at her screen again but could not concentrate enough to write. Who could she talk to about Simmons, she wondered? She still felt alienated from the other reporters and didn’t feel she could confide in them. She was still slightly mad at Alan but he acted as if the little blow-up of two nights ago had never happened, so she decided that he was her best option. She wandered over to where he was looking at a page proof.

“Hey, Alan?”

“Karen, I was going to come over in a minute. I have an update for you on The Avenger project. What’s up?” he said.

“I have an Avenger update too, but I’m in a little quandary.” She saw him wait for her to continue. “A police detective just called me to say that they’ve had a breakthrough in the search for The Avenger.”

“That’s great,” Alan said. “What’s the problem?”

“The problem is, I don’t trust this guy. He’s hit on me almost every time I’ve come in contact with him and he wants to discuss his information at a bar. Apparently he wants it to be off the record or something.”

“Well, he probably can’t officially give you the information if it hasn’t been confirmed.”

“I know, but like I said, I don’t trust him.”

“Follow me,” he said. “This might help you decide.”

He turned and began walking toward Catherine’s office. Alan knocked on the half-open door and then entered, and Karen walked in as well. Catherine sat behind the large desk that looked to be made of solid cherry. Karen thought it looked as if the editor’s hair had been dyed a deeper maroon. Catherine motioned with her arms for Alan and Karen to take a seat and then put her elbows on the table, clasped her hands and rested her chin on her fingers.

“So,” she said. “The Avenger has made another appearance, he might be a murderer and it’s Tuesday night. We are running the feature package on him this Sunday.”

“But,” Karen stammered, “it isn’t ready yet, and we don’t know for sure he was involved in that murder. That would change the whole story.”

“Like I said, it’s Tuesday night. That gives you the rest of tonight, all day tomorrow, Thursday, and most of Friday to get this done.”

"Karen just told me on the way in here that a detective supposedly has information on The Avenger's identity."

"That's great," Catherine said. "If we can get that before the TV stations we will be heroes; you, Karen, in the eyes of the public, and all of us in the eyes of corporate."

"I'm not sure I trust the guy," Karen said. Her reasoning was growing weaker the more she said it.

"Karen," Catherine said, and looked at her in a way that was at once maternal and threatening, "you may not trust this gentleman, but I trust that you will do what you have to do. A lot is riding on this and I, we're all, counting on you."

With that Catherine turned her attention to some papers on the desk and Karen knew she had been given her marching orders. She waited until they were out of earshot before she spoke to Alan.

"I guess that makes up my mind, huh?"

"If we can pull this off it will be huge," Alan said. "You'll be able to write your own ticket."

"What about you?"

"I have three little kids. I'm not going to keep moving them around the country every time there's a chance for a promotion. I'm happy here."

Karen looked at the clock and saw that she needed to get moving. "All right," she said. "Times a wastin' and I have date at the Delta Club."

It was hard enough finding a parking spot near the club and now she was forced to wait in a line just to get in. She hadn't done this since her college days. Karen could hear the music throbbing from the sidewalk where she stood with girls who dressed in a way that Karen never would have even when she had liked how her body

looked. She had never been to the Delta Club before but it had the reputation of being something of a meat market. Not surprising that Simmons would choose this as his meeting place. She saw that the bouncer was checking IDs so she took her license out of her purse. When she reached the guy he waved her through without even looking twice at her or her license. Would it have hurt the guy to flatter her? Two steps into the bar she realized how impossible it would be to talk in here. The music was straight dance club mixes, and although it wasn't what she usually listened to she thought that under different circumstances, maybe with a few friends, she could cut loose for a few hours. Unfortunately, her old friends like Marci were parents and the crowd she hung out with now wouldn't be caught dead in a place like this. The consensus would be too shallow for journalists.

The immediate problem was finding Detective Simmons in this throng. Karen couldn't imagine him dancing, but then again, he had chosen this place. She thought she would check the bar area first, and after pushing her way through too many unaccommodating people, she saw him chatting up a peroxide blond who looked older than Karen but dressed as if she was nineteen. Just the sort of look to attract the man she imagined Simmons to be. When Karen was finally able to catch his eye, Simmons leaned into the woman's ear and then patted her on the butt as she turned to go. The woman gave Karen a dirty look, as if she considered her competition. What a joke, Karen thought. Simmons tried to ask her something but she couldn't make out the words.

"What?" She knew they wouldn't be able to have a real conversation in here and wondered if Simmons had anticipated that.

"Do you want a drink?"

He had leaned in so close to her that his mustache hair tickled her ear. She shivered from his proximity and pondered his question. She could really go for a gin

and tonic, but she wanted to keep this as professional as possible, since it was a business meeting for her.

"I'll take a ginger ale," she shouted.

He gave her a funny look and then she watched as the bartender almost immediately came to get his order, ignoring the other patrons who had been standing and waiting much longer. She figured they must know he's a cop. When the bartender returned with their drinks she set a beer in front of Karen. She looked at Simmons.

"What? I thought you said you wanted an ale?"

"*Ginger* ale," Karen said.

"Oops." He shrugged his shoulders in fake apology.

Karen thought about refusing the drink but then decided what the hell, one beer wouldn't hurt her. Simmons picked up his drink – it looked like mixed drink with cola – and motioned for her to follow him. She noticed that he hadn't had to pay for the drinks.

"Let's move somewhere a little quieter," he shouted.

They snaked through the crowd, skirted the dance area and entered a side room where Simmons guided them to a small booth that had just opened up. Karen had to move a couple of empty glasses to the edge of the table so she could set down her beer. Within a minute a waitress came by to clear the table off and Simmons said something to make the girl laugh.

"You must be a regular here," Karen said. She still had to raise her voice higher than normal, but the need to shout was gone.

"I've been here a few times," he said. "I help them out sometimes with security when I'm off-duty." He took a sip from his glass. "So what do you think of this place?"

"It makes me feel old," Karen said. "Ten years ago I would have loved it."

“Feeling young is a state of mind.”

Yeah, Karen thought, but hitting on women young enough to be your daughter was disgusting. “So,” she said in an attempt to get the conversation on the proper track, “what’s your Avenger scoop?”

“Relax for a minute, would you?” He leaned back and spread his arms along the edge of the booth, one hand mere inches from Karen’s shoulder.

She moved slightly away from him and before she could respond, the waitress brought two more drinks to the table.

“What are you doing, Detective?”

“What, these?” he said, indicating the drinks. “I’m trying to be nice to you. And please, call me Hank.”

“I thought we were here to talk business, Detective.”

“We will. Jeez, did you think that maybe I’m a little nervous here? It wouldn’t be highly looked upon by my superiors if they found out I was talking to you.”

Karen doubted the part about him being nervous; he acted anything but. As far as the rest of his statement, it likely was true that the higher-ups at the police department would not want him talking to her about The Avenger, especially if there had been a breakthrough. Along with most other public agencies, they wanted to control the flow of information, which was why it was important for her to have sources, such as Hank Simmons.

“How good is your information?” she asked.

“Let’s just say that you won’t be disappointed.”

She doubted that but Karen settled back and took another sip of beer. She had a feeling that this was going to be a long night.

Two beers and three gin and tonics later, Karen's head was swirling. She was fairly certain that Simmons wasn't going to tell her anything but he had turned out to be more charming company than she ever would have thought. In the beginning he had talked about himself too much but then he had asked some intelligent questions of her. The thought of telling Alan and Catherine that the evening had been a waste did not appeal to her but she would have enough for the story without any help from Simmons – it just wouldn't be quite as powerful as she had hoped. At this point, though, she didn't care. She closed her eyes and rested her head on the back of the booth. The music pulsed through her until she lost her sense of being in a crowd. The heavy, repetitive bass line was almost sexual in its rhythm and Karen wished there was a man in her life right now. At that moment, almost as if he had read her thoughts, Simmons placed a hand right above her knee. Karen involuntarily jerked her leg to the side.

"Hey, I was just checking to make sure you hadn't fallen asleep," he said.

"I'm awake." She felt flustered, partly because his touch had felt nice. "I should probably get going," she said. "It's way past my bedtime."

"You're not going anywhere," he said.

"Why not?" She didn't like the tone he used.

"You've drank way too much for me to let you drive. I am a cop, remember?"

"Did you plan this?"

"Come on, you have to admit, we're having a good time."

"Shit, what am I going to do? I guess I'll call a cab." She opened her purse to grab her cell phone.

Simmons put his hand over hers, effectively closing the purse. "There's no need to do that," he said. "I can drive you home."

"What about my car?"

"We can get it tomorrow. One more for the road?"

Karen returned her head to the booth. Why not, she thought. One more wouldn't do any harm – she wasn't going back to work tonight in this condition – and it might bring back that nice feeling she had just two minutes or so ago.

When they finally left the club Karen had to hold onto Simmons's arm to keep from stumbling. She allowed him to take her to his car and she almost curled up in the front seat after he opened the door for her. As he drove away she had to ask the question he must have known was coming.

"You don't have any information about The Avenger, do you?"

"Oh, but I do," he said. "You just haven't asked the right question."

"Where are you going? I haven't even told you where my apartment is."

"I know where you live. I'm a detective, remember?"

Karen shut her eyes and the next thing she knew she was home. With a little effort she got out of the car and started to walk to the entrance.

"Hold on," Simmons said. "Aren't you going to thank me?"

She looked at him and extended her right hand. "Thank you for a interesting evening, Detective, even if it was ultimately a waste of my time."

"It doesn't have to be."

For the second time in a two days a man bent down to kiss Karen, although Simmons was much more aggressive with both his mouth and his hands than Matt had been. She tried to push him away but he wouldn't let her. Finally, he pulled back, although he still held her.

"I know who The Avenger is," he whispered.

Karen was still in shock over what he had just done that this news almost knocked her over. "You do not. Who is it?"

He moved a hand over her left breast. "How bad do you want to know?"

She didn't think twice as she opened the door and led him inside.

Karen woke to the sounds of a garbage truck in the street. She tried to focus on the clock radio next to her bed but couldn't focus on the numbers without her glasses, which she tried to now find. She found her glasses, struggled out of bed and went to make coffee. She sat at her kitchen table and shivered as she recalled the end of her evening. It was bad enough that she had slept with Simmons – at that point in the evening the alcohol had helped her like him enough – but what followed was the most humiliating experience of her life. After he had rolled off of her she had asked him who The Avenger was. 'Are you that naïve,' he had said. He dressed while she stayed on the bed, with covers pulled as high as they would go. His parting words would stand as the statement of her journalistic downfall: 'Let me know next time you need a source.'

Karen noticed that the message light on her answering machine was flashing. She checked the message and heard Alan's voice telling her that the Chief of Police was holding a press conference at 3 p.m. to talk about The Avenger's part in the recent death. She looked at the clock on the microwave and realized that she had less than an hour to shower, dress and get to the press conference.

She didn't know why she hadn't anticipated it, but one of the first people she saw at the gathering was Simmons. He offered her a slimy smile and leaned to whisper something to the cop standing next to him. That man looked at her and laughed. Karen didn't have to decipher what Simmons had said. She sat down to await the Chief's comments, making small talk with some of the TV reporters she knew. The room grew silent and the Chief walked up to the podium. Karen thought how much he had aged in just the short time she had been on the police beat. The bags under his eyes had bags of their own and his face personified gaunt.

"I want to thank you all for coming and I'll try to keep this brief, since I know you all have deadlines. We are not ready to say that The Avenger is guilty, but at this point we want to talk to him. In the past we have, for better or worse, left The Avenger to his own devices. Now it appears that there is at least the possibility of his involvement in the death of Edward Reilly. We are going to escalate our attempts to discover his identity and to question him. I want to repeat that this does not mean he will be charged with any crime. When we have solid information we will pass that on to you, as long as it does not compromise our investigation into this homicide. I will now take your questions."

Karen was about to ask a question when a man sat down next to her. She looked at him and saw a fresh-faced uniformed cop who couldn't have been on the force very long. She didn't recognize him and wondered what he wanted. She tried to listen to the Chief answer a question when the cop whispered to her.

"I know who is buried in Grant's Tomb. What's that worth to you?"

He broke up laughing and quickly walked away, passing by Simmons before moving out of sight. Karen felt the burn move from her throat to her forehead. She had to move, had to get out of here. She quickly gathered her notebook and jacket and walked out of the room. A couple of people tried to ask if everything was all right but she blew past them. She saw Lieutenant Leary walk toward her. She tried to pull herself together to greet him but he spoke first.

"I would have expected better from you," he said, and then walked on.

Leary was the man she most respected on the force and she had disappointed him. Tomorrow she would consider how unfair his comment was but right now Karen felt overwhelmed. She stumbled out the door and leaned against the side of the building, taking gulps of air and trying not to cry. In that moment she wondered if her newspaper career in this town was over.

Karen walked up the sloped entrance hallway that led into the newsroom and stopped. She took a look around at everything that just yesterday had been as familiar to her as her childhood bedroom. The same people sat at the same desks and typed at the same terminals, but now it was fuzzy, softer; like lights on a Christmas tree looked when she took off her glasses. An hour ago she was embarrassed by her actions with Simmons but thought it had stopped there. Now, the entire police force might know what had happened. She couldn't continue working this beat.

She sat down and did busy work – straightening her desk, throwing out old papers – and kept looking up from her terminal to see if Alan was free. It was a conversation she needed to have and one that she would have done anything to avoid. No, she thought, last night she had been willing to do anything. That was why she had to have this chat. Karen wondered which beat they might reassign her to; she hoped she wouldn't be banished to the Business section. She looked up again; Alan was still in the four o'clock news meeting that decided which stories would wind up on 1A. Another bout of pain slapped her as she realized that her byline might never see the light of 1A again. All because she had wanted something so bad that she lost the judgment that made her a good reporter. The ring of her phone brought her back to the here and now.

"Metro desk, may I help you?"

"Karen, it's Alan."

She flung her head toward the meeting area and saw Alan waving at her.

"Come on over for a second," he said. "Everybody wants an Avenger update."

"Yeah, sure," she answered. She gently placed the receiver down and felt the blood race into her face. This was not the audience she was looking for to be her

confessors.

At Karen's request, Catherine had agreed to move the group to her office for the discussion. After clearing her conscience, Karen sat and watched as Catherine tried to suppress her anger. Whatever methods the editor used to stay in control failed her now.

"I don't care if she's screwing an elephant as long as she's not covering the circus," Catherine said to Alan. Then she turned her wrath toward Karen. "I cannot believe you did this to me. I put my trust in you and you can't even keep your pants on long enough to do your job."

"What are we going to do?" Alan asked.

"What are we going to do?" Catherine parroted. "What we're going to do is give her five minutes to clean out her desk and then escort her sorry ass out the door."

"I'm fired?" Karen managed to say. Her throat tightened and tears forced their way to the edge of her eyes.

"Come on, Karen," Alan said softly. He tried to lead her by the arm but Karen was frozen. "Let's go," he said again. This time Karen allowed herself to be guided out of Catherine's office.

She had expected to be disciplined, even taken off of the police beat and Avenger story, but worst case she had hoped they would have allowed her to resign. She knew what she had done was against all journalistic ethics – and apparently the newspaper's code of conduct – but she hadn't thought she would have being fired on her résumé forever. She tried not to notice that everyone in the newsroom was watching her pack a couple of boxes with personal belongings. They were all happy now, she thought. All those that had learned to despise her now had their moment of retribution. All because of a goddamned story about some psychopath. She finished

packing and did not look anywhere except straight ahead as she left the newsroom for the final time.

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Had he really meant to kill the guy? Todd couldn't say for sure. He hadn't thought that was his intention when he went to confront Eddie. Looking back, maybe it was inevitable; the guy had threatened Todd with a gun and then had followed Todd to his apartment, showing off one of The Avenger's business cards. But this most recent development had certainly changed the landscape of Todd's future. It wasn't as if he could go back to his apartment, find a new job and pretend that this had never happened. Well, he could, but the ironic notion that had been nagging him was had he committed a crime that now needed to be avenged?

It had seemed so harmless at the time. Todd had wanted to confront Eddie on his terms before Eddie showed up some night all juiced up and full of anger, or had sold the knowledge of his identity to someone even more dangerous. There was likely no shortage of people who would like to know who The Avenger was. Todd had parked as near as he could find a spot in front of Eddie's apartment building and noticed that his five-year-old car was the nicest one on the street. He had to sidestep a man either passed out or sleeping in the entranceway, drool winding from the corner of his mouth. The man was of an indeterminable age, although Todd guessed he was

fairly old since his mouth seemed to be folding in on itself. The man clutched an open bottle of some booze that had leaked across his pants and shirt. Todd was glad that Karen had provided him with Eddie's apartment number because no names were listed anywhere that he could see. There was no security door in this building so Todd was able to walk around until he located the correct apartment, and then he knocked on the door. He could hear the sliding cover of the peephole move and felt Eddie was staring at him. Eddie opened the door a crack so he could speak.

"Whaddya want?"

Todd immediately knew that Eddie had been drinking. His words were slurred and his breath reeked of alcohol. The security chain was still attached so the door had only opened a few inches.

"I want to talk to you for a minute," Todd said.

"I got nothing to say to you."

"Listen, I had nothing to do with you getting arrested."

"I don't believe you."

"Come on, Eddie. You know that I don't belong in your world. You told me yourself that I don't have what it takes." Todd could hear Eddie's heavy breathing and wondered what was going through the man's mind.

"If you had nothin' to do with it, then why are you here? What does The Avenger want with me? I still can't believe a chicken shit like you is The Avenger."

"Because I don't want you hounding me and stalking me at my apartment. Nothing personal, but I don't want to see you again."

Looking back, Todd was amazed at how quickly it had all happened. Eddie had let him into the apartment and Todd barely had time to take in his surroundings when Eddie pulled a gun. Eddie was even drunker than Todd had thought and he wobbled as he stood. He started yelling at Todd, blaming him for his arrest, and said that if he was

going back to jail then he might as well make it worth his time. He said that he would become famous for killing The Avenger. For a brief moment Todd thought that he *could* be killed. It could not have lasted more than a second or two, but as Todd watched Eddie, his eyes also took in some of the apartment. He saw a porn magazine lying open on a coffee table, a filled ashtray on top of the television, and he noticed a poster showing off a bikini-clad model astride a motorcycle on the wall behind Eddie. Then Eddie tripped over the coffee table and Todd jumped on him. The two men rolled on the floor and in the ensuing struggle the gun went off and Eddie was dead, a bullet directly through the heart. Todd had to push Eddie off of him and he lay there for a minute, maybe two, before he could focus enough to stand up. Eddie's blood covered the front of his shirt and his hands. He wiped those on his pants, and then cursed at himself because he would have to dispose of those now as well. He looked at Eddie, who if you could ignore the blood, looked as if he might be sleeping.

Todd remembered feeling incredibly calm at that point. He knew the noise from the gun would attract attention – maybe not as much as if it had happened in the suburbs – but he made sure that he wiped any potentially incriminating fingerprints off the gun before laying it beside Eddie. He hadn't thought he touched anything else, other than Eddie, of course, and he then considered how to leave. He didn't think it would be smart to walk out the front door, so he walked over and, hand under a dry part of his shirt, locked all of the locks and reattached the chain. He then looked for the window that opened to the fire escape, found it in what looked to be Eddie's bedroom and saw that it led to an empty alley. He opened a drawer and found a T-shirt that he changed into, crumpling his bloody one in a ball. He used Eddie's shirt to wipe the fingerprints from the drawer handle and then turned toward the window. Before he climbed out he felt the need for The Avenger to take some accountability for the shooting. Even though he was sure that if it came down to it he could rightly plead self-

defense, he nudged one of The Avenger's business cards out of his wallet with a knuckle in an effort to avoid having his fingers touch it, and let it fall on Eddie's still-warm body, knowing he was complicating his situation by doing so. That would give Karen something to write about, he thought. Then he went back to the bedroom, opened the window, climbed onto the fire escape, closed the window and walked unaccosted to his car. He could tell that there was a commotion taking place in front of the building but he was able to drive away without any hassles. As he waited to turn off Eddie's street he could hear the approaching sirens.

After driving about ten minutes he felt himself start to shake involuntarily and he had to pull off onto the side of the road. His knuckles were white from gripping the steering wheel so tight and he felt close to hyperventilating. It took about five minutes before he had calmed down enough to trust himself to drive. He thought about what he should do next, where he should go. He knew Matt was probably expecting him but now that Eddie was dead, he had no reason not to return to his own apartment. That was his best option since he didn't want to see or talk to anyone, especially an older brother who might ask too many questions. He looked at the clock on his dashboard and saw that it wasn't as late as he thought it might be. The incident at Eddie's – already he was trying to downplay it in his mind – hadn't lasted more than twenty minutes from the time he first knocked on the door until he climbed out the window. He would go home and call Matt to tell him he didn't need to stay there after all. He knew the shooting hadn't been intentional, but Eddie was dead and he was a murderer and Todd needed to learn to live with that. If his life depended on it he couldn't say for sure if it had been him that pulled the trigger, or if he had forced Eddie's finger to squeeze. All Todd knew was that after the shot had been fired, he looked down and the gun was in his hand. The adrenaline that he had felt at the apartment had subsided and, for the first time, Todd thought about how lucky he was to be alive. If the barrel of the

gun had been pointed a couple of inches in another direction it could be him starting to stiffen right now. How was he going to accept the knowledge that he was responsible for someone's death? He let loose a crazed laugh as he remembered that he had wanted to start looking for a job soon. What he wouldn't give for a nice, boring office job now.

Following a mostly sleepless night, Todd rose from bed with one thought in his head: he had killed a person. And even if it was in self-defense, he had initiated the meeting and had gone to Eddie's apartment sensing something big would happen. He had gone because Matt, Karen, and the rest of the city were waiting for The Avenger to strike again. It seemed that everyone close to him depended on The Avenger to some degree and he couldn't let them down. Todd suddenly felt nauseous and ran to the bathroom barely in time to vomit the little he had eaten recently into the toilet. He hunched over the bowl and fought the spasms that kept rolling over him. He had killed someone. He was no better than those he had tracked down as The Avenger. Actually, he was worse; he hadn't thrown a cigarette butt or two out a car window, he hadn't grabbed a woman's purse, he hadn't stolen a car – he had quite possibly pulled the trigger on a gun and killed another human being. Someone who could have had children, for all Todd knew. Someone whose grieving survivors were wishing right now that Todd would burn in hell. Someone who might this very minute have been screaming for vengeance from wherever he was. But The Avenger could not help Eddie; The Avenger did not know how to help himself.

Todd washed his face and then thought about his next move. First, he should call Matt and let him know he was okay. His brother was likely worried, especially since Todd had indicated he would be staying at his house for a short time. He punched

in the number and felt a breeze of relief when the answering machine clicked on. He was able to mumble something about being safe and back at his apartment before he hung up.

Todd went back to the bathroom to brush his teeth in an attempt to rid his mouth of the acrid taste that lingered. There were things he had planned on doing today – such as looking for a job – but he knew that the best thing to do was to stay away from people for a while. He had to come to grips with what had happened before he could trust himself in a public situation. He replayed the events in his head numerous times to see if he had left any clues to his identity that would lead the police to his door. The idea of spending the rest of his life behind bars caused the bile to again rise in his throat.

Todd spent the rest of that day and all of the following one holed up in his apartment. The only contact he had with the outside world was to walk a few feet outside the complex's door to get the paper, and to grab his mail. That first morning he cringed when he saw the story about the murder with The Avenger's connection splayed across the top of the first page. Well, he thought, the rationale behind leaving his card was for that very reason. She was getting the story that she wanted, that they all wanted. He knew enough about society and culture to understand that Eddie's death was an inevitable part of the hero cycle. Even though everyone was aghast that The Avenger could do such a thing, at least it fulfilled the build-them-up-tear-them-down mentality. This would make everyone feel, if not superior, then at least a little better about themselves. They may not have been helping the world but at least they didn't go around murdering innocent people. They would have hated him more if he had simply faded away into oblivion, never to be heard from again. In his mind they had needed him to kill Eddie in order to finalize the myth, to crystallize The Avenger they needed, and maybe that was why he had left behind the business card. Maybe he, too, had a

masochistic need to kill The Avenger.

After two days of solitude Todd felt as if he might explode. He needed to talk to someone about what had happened, someone who could, if not absolve him, at least understand what had happened. And although she was in the position to hurt him the most, he wanted that person to be Karen. He called her apartment and convinced her to let him come over. She had sounded as distraught as he was and he chalked it up to job stress. As he drove, he played through different scenarios as to how he would break the news to her. Todd knew the burden he was about to put on her. Not only from the moral standpoint of knowing he had killed someone and that the police were searching for him, but also from the professional angle of giving her the biggest scoop she would ever have and hoping she wouldn't use it. He wouldn't beg, but he would just lay it out for her: this is who I am and this is what I have done.

He rang the bell and waited for her to come down and let him in. It was a beautiful day, with the sun providing enough heat that he knew summer was no longer teasing them about coming; it was here. The daffodils and tulips that someone in the house had planted had already bloomed and withered. It was amazing that the seasons had changed without him paying much attention. Karen finally opened the door and Todd's first reaction was to think she looked how he felt. He knew she never used a ton of make-up before but now she looked as if she didn't care at all about her appearance. Her sunken eyes looked discolored, almost bruised, whether from lack of sleep or from crying, Todd couldn't guess. Her hair showed no signs of body and lay flat against her head. If she were a guy she would have had a three-day stubble on her face. She didn't say a word, she simply left the door open and started to walk back upstairs to her apartment. He followed in apprehensive anticipation of how the

conversation would turn out.

“I won’t keep you long if you have to get ready for work,” he said. He looked around the apartment and thought how much more like a home it looked than his cookie-cutter complex. So much of her personality was invested in the choice of furniture and décor. Maybe his furnishings said the same about him, but he considered his apartment more as simply a place to sleep rather than as a home. Well, he rationalized, this was a house and not a building built to be broken into homogenous pieces.

“Don’t worry,” she said with a strange laugh. “I have no plans for going to work today. Or tomorrow, for that matter.”

Okay, Todd thought, maybe this wasn’t the best time to have a serious chat with her.

“Listen,” he said. “I have something important to talk to you about.”

He wasn’t sure how to begin and she was barely paying attention to him. He began to get upset with her when she walked to the stereo and put in a CD. He followed her and spun her around to force her to look at him. Todd thought her eyes looked flat, and they showed no interest in what he had to say.

“Karen, I killed that guy. I’m The Avenger.”

It came out easier than he would have thought and much more quickly than he had planned, but he felt he would lose her attention even more if he drew it out. She stared at him until he noticed that the flatness had changed to annoyance.

“Not today, Todd. I can’t handle it today.”

“I gotta tell somebody and you’re the person I trust most in this world. I am, or at least I was, The Avenger.”

“Todd, you’re pissing me off.”

He couldn’t keep still while Karen went and lay on her couch. Why wouldn’t

she acknowledge what he had said? Granted, it was a strange claim, but the thought must have crossed her mind, especially after the police had released Eddie's name.

"Why won't you take me seriously?" he asked.

"Because I'm sure by now your brother has told you why I am the laughingstock of the newsroom and you come over here saying this to me. I would have expected a little more sensitivity from you."

"Matt hasn't told me anything."

He felt her eyes burn into him, as if they tried to find something deeper, past his words and behind what his expression showed, that would tell her the truth. But she didn't have to dig; the truth was out there for her to see.

"All right then," she said, and locked her eyes on his. "A couple of nights ago I slept with a sleazy cop because I thought he knew who The Avenger was. He lied to me and I got fired for it. So, as you can see, I'm not much in the mood for Avenger jokes."

At that moment Todd felt the earth come to a stop, as if it, too, was shocked to inaction. Karen had slept with a cop in order to find out who he was? It boggled his mind. Because of him, she had lost the most important thing in her life. He, or rather, The Avenger, had become that important to her.

"I've made you speechless, huh?" Karen said.

She moved to the alcove that offered a view of the street below. Todd walked over to her and tried to find enough room to sit beside her. He wondered if he should try to console her, but he knew he had to get everything out in the open first. He reached into his wallet and took out the remaining Avenger business cards and handed them to her. He waited for a reaction, any sort of sign to tell him how she would take the news.

"Goddamn you, Todd. Goddamn you." Her voice was controlled and quiet.

“I never dreamed it would end up like this,” he said.

“Was this all a game to you?” Karen asked. Her voice now rose in both volume and pitch. “Did you enjoy watching me make an ass of myself chasing after The Avenger, talking to you about him, and all the time you were laughing to yourself. I can’t believe it. Get out!”

Todd didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t been able to visualize how the conversation would go but he hoped that she would forgive him. He hadn’t been prepared for this amount of anger from Karen; of course he walked in not knowing what had happened to her during the past few days.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“Please get your sorry ass out of my apartment.”

He looked at her and saw that she had started to cry. He tried to put an arm around her but she threw it off and started to pound him in the chest. He backed away and walked to the door. Before he left he turned to see her sitting on the floor, sobbing into her hands.

Todd could hear his phone ringing as he unlocked the door to his apartment. He hurried in, not bothering to shut the door behind him, hoping it was Karen.

“Hey, Todd. It’s George.”

“Oh, hi George.”

“Well that sure sounded enthusiastic. How have you been? I haven’t heard from you in a while.”

“I’ve had a lot going on lately,” Todd said.

“Any of it job related?” George asked.

“Nothing other than going to the unemployment office.”

“Well, then I have some great news for you. I just got hired at Donnell Associates.”

“Hey, congratulations,” Todd said. At least somebody he knew had something good happen to him.

“It gets better,” George said. “Donnell is moving all of their finance-related jobs to Genesee and my new boss asked me if there was anyone I knew who would be interested in a job. I mentioned your name and he said to get him a resume ASAP.”

“Really,” Todd said. He knew he should feel excited but the thought of going back to a full-time job running financial reports scared him. That was the life for a different Todd, the one that hadn’t killed anyone.

“They seem like a good company, although the vacation time isn’t as much as what we had. By the way, that was some stunt you pulled with Susan Loserio. I take it you did that on purpose?”

“How did you hear about it?”

“That kind of news travels fast. From what I heard, she was pissed off for the rest of the reception. And it’s something that can’t be mentioned at work for fear of termination.”

“I felt inspired at the time.” Todd smiled at the memory. Okay, maybe it hadn’t gotten his or anybody else’s job back, but at least it had made people chuckle.

“Too bad she’s walking away with not even a slap on the wrist.”

“What do you mean?” Todd asked.

“Both she and the company were cleared of any wrong-doing by the investigators.”

“So,” Todd said. “She fires twenty percent of the employees, drives the company into bankruptcy and walks away with \$266 million, and nothing happens to her?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

Todd couldn’t even get mad anymore. Every feeling of injustice had been drained from him since Eddie had died. A month ago, a week ago, he would have felt like exploding, but now there was nothing. No anger, no sense of having to act. It was as if he had a lobotomy that sliced off that portion of his brain.

“So,” George pushed. “Do you think you can e-mail me your résumé tonight?”

Slow down, Todd thought. He grasped for a slight delay. “I’m on my way out right now,” he said. “It might not be until tomorrow.”

“That’ll work,” George said. “Let me give you my e-mail address.”

Todd wrote down the information and hung up. How did life get so screwed up, he wondered. Here was an opportunity that he should be jumping all over and he knew he wouldn’t even send George his résumé. He couldn’t consider starting a new job until he had these other minor details worked through, such as when would the police show up and arrest him? He tried to think back to the night of Eddie’s death to ascertain if he had left anything that could incriminate him. Nothing stood out, but then he hadn’t been thinking too clearly at the time. But even more so than the police, his thoughts moved back to Karen. Would it be possible to make things right with her?

The next afternoon, following another night of limited sleep, Todd felt as if he had to try to talk to Karen. He didn’t bother to call; he simply drove to her place. He sat in his car and watched the window from her apartment that faced the street until he saw movement that indicated she was home. He walked over and rang her doorbell. It took three rings before he heard footsteps approach. When Karen opened the door, Todd thought she looked even worse than yesterday – if he had slept for an hour or two, she hadn’t slept at all.

“How could you kill someone?”

“It was an accident,” he said, “It was self-defense, I swear it was. It was the second time he had pulled a gun on me, and he had followed me home one day and he was crazy.” Todd felt a lever inside him release and everything wanted to flood out. He couldn’t keep the words in and he doubted he was making much sense. “I never wanted it to go that far but I had to do something. He had one of The Avenger’s business cards and I was afraid he would sell the information, or something. And I had wanted to quit, to stop being The Avenger, but everybody wanted more, everybody thought I was a fraud, the pressure was building and it was helping you and I knew how bad you wanted The Avenger to do something and now I’m screwed.” He took a couple of deep breaths to try to calm down. He realized he was still standing outside. “Can I come in?”

Karen left the door open and turned to walk up to her apartment. Todd took a quick look around to see if anyone had possibly heard and then followed.

“Are you going to go to the police?” Karen asked.

“I don’t know. You’ve got to believe me when I say it was self-defense. But what about everything else I’ve done? I don’t want to go to jail.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Why what?”

“Everything. Why become The Avenger. Why toy with me.”

“I never meant to toy with you.” Then he remembered the letter he had sent to Karen. Todd sat in the recliner and continued. “Maybe in the beginning I had some fun, but I never thought it would get this out of hand. As far as becoming The Avenger . . .” Todd raised his hands in an attempt to explain something he couldn’t precisely put into words. “I guess I thought I was helping. And now you know everything. You’d be an accomplice if I get caught.”

“Todd, relax for a second.”

“I need a beer, do you have any?”

“Yeah, there’s some in the fridge.”

“Do you want one?”

“No,” Karen said. “I don’t think I’ll feel like drinking for a while.”

Todd went into the kitchen and grabbed a beer. He waited a minute before he went back to where Karen was. He thought he had sounded like an idiot but he had to admit, now that he had talked to her he felt a little bit better. The down side was that Karen had knowledge that could prove dangerous for her. Before he left they would need to come to some sort of conclusion on how to move forward. For now, he thought he should try and lighten the mood a little.

“I can’t believe you slept with a cop just to find out who I was.”

She looked sharply up at him. Okay, he thought, maybe that was the wrong approach to go with.

“I know it’s no excuse, but I drank too much,” she said. “I knew Simmons was repulsive before that evening and I can’t believe I let him convince me otherwise. You can’t understand how bad I wanted to break that story. I guess in the end it broke me.”

“Karen, I really am sorry for how everything turned out. Did you say the guy’s name was Simmons?”

“Todd, you’re not going to do anything stupid, are you?”

“No. My avenging days are through. I’m sure Matt will be disappointed.”

“Oh my God, with everything that’s been going on I forgot all about him. Did he tell you what happened?”

“No. I haven’t talked to anyone other than you for days.”

“He kissed me the other night.”

“No shit, Matt finally did something. How did you react?”

“I slapped him so hard his head spun around.”

Todd laughed at the image in spite of knowing how hurt Matt would have been. “That must have crushed him. I’m sure you know how long he’s been pining for you.”

“That’s why I finally told him to do something about it. I guess he thinks I’m a bitch – especially after he heard about me getting fired – but I wasn’t trying to set him up for anything, I just wanted him to get on with his life.”

“What happened after you slapped him?”

“He had the worst expression, like a loyal dog whose owner kicked him for no reason. Hopefully he and I can get past this and be friends again.”

“I can’t see Matt holding a grudge for too long,” Todd said. “One way or the other he’ll decide it was his fault and apologize to you.”

“Listen,” Karen said. “I can’t believe I haven’t thrown you out again, but are you hungry? I could go for some Chinese and there’s a great place near here that delivers. It was where Matt and I were going to go and I’ve been hankering for it ever since.”

“Sounds good,” Todd said.

She called in their order and figured he could help get ready by cleaning her kitchen, at least enough so they had a place to sit. Karen came in and they began to wash some dishes in what Todd thought was an oddly domestic moment for the situation they found themselves in. But he knew that busy work gave both of them a chance to collect their thoughts.

“So what’s next for you?” Karen asked. “I assume that The Avenger is no longer, but are you going to try and find a job?”

Todd remembered George’s offer, and his promise that he would send his résumé. “Actually, this guy that I used to work with just got hired and he thinks the company would hire me as well.”

"That's great," Karen said. Todd must have had a strange expression, because she added, "That is great, isn't it?"

"It should be," Todd said. And it really should be, he thought. There was no reason it shouldn't, but since today was a day for openness, he would try to explain. "I don't know if I'm ready for a steady job, or even able to do it anymore. Too much has happened that it would be hard to pretend the past few months had never occurred. Have you thought about what you're going to do?"

Before Karen could answer, the doorbell chimed.

"Saved by the bell," she said.

Todd set out a couple of plates and utensils while Karen went down to get the food. The more he thought about it, the more he doubted that he would follow through with George. He couldn't say what he would do with his life but he didn't think he could turn back the clock. Karen came into the kitchen and set down the bag of food. There was Cashew Chicken for him and Moo Goo Gai Pan for her, with fried rice and pork dumplings to share. He grabbed a fork for him but she chose to use chopsticks, a skill that had always eluded him.

He waited until they were well into their dinner before he asked the question again. "So, you never answered me, what are you going to do?"

Karen dipped a piece of dumpling into the cup of hoisen sauce before answering. "To be honest, I have no clue. The *Gazette* is the only paper in town, unless you count those weekly community rags. I still think I could be a good reporter. It's in my blood."

Todd looked at her and understood what his brother had felt all these years. Even without make-up and not trying to look good there was an attractiveness about her. Her eyes shone with life again and even in this situation her personality made her comfortable to be around. She was someone who knew his darkest secret, who had

every reason to hate him, and still she sat across the table and shared dinner with him.

"I have an idea," he said. He had barely had time to crystallize the thought before he spoke. "Let's move somewhere else – another state, another time zone – and start over."

She looked up with a bite held inches from her mouth. "Excuse me?" she said.

"I'm serious. What do either of us have here? You have no job, your mom is moving and you have no other family in the area. I have no job and I sure as hell don't want to be reminded of The Avenger every time I turn around."

"You make us sound so pathetic."

"I feel sort of pathetic."

It was strange, he hadn't even thought of leaving town before thirty seconds ago and now he was absolutely sure it was the right thing to do. At least for him. He couldn't gauge Karen's reaction as she did not look at him and concentrated on her food.

"You're a fugitive, remember?" she said. "I can't say I'll leave town with you just like that."

Todd took that as a small victory. At least she hadn't come right out and said no. She hadn't said that it was a stupid idea that didn't even bear discussion.

"I'm not sure how I'll live with myself no matter where I live. But this could be what we need," Todd added.

"What we need?" she asked. "When you say we, are you referring to us as one or as something each of us separately needs?"

Todd decided to test the waters. "How do you want me to mean it?"

"I can't believe you're thinking about this now." She pushed her plate away and rose from the table. She stood by the sink with her back to him and when she spoke, he had to concentrate to hear. "Everybody wants something from me lately and I don't

know that I have anything left to give.”

“Karen, I’m not asking you to give me anything. I’m just saying we could both use a chance to start over.”

She turned to look at him. “What about that guy you killed?”

“What about him?”

“Don’t you realize the police are looking for you? Even if you say it was self-defense, the police are looking for a murderer. If you left town, you’d be on the lam. Not to mention all of those other stunts you pulled that I’m sure they’d love to talk to you about. Jesus Christ, Todd. You set a car on fire, you took money from a bank robber.”

Todd didn’t want to think of it as running away. He had never been one to back down or not accept responsibility. But this felt different to him. In a way, he didn’t believe he had to answer to anyone or for anything. Maybe someday, years down the road, the guilt would be too much, but for now he had confessed to the one person he felt he needed to.

“I don’t think the police know I exist. Unless you want to tell them.”

“It might make the evening with Detective Simmons seem worthwhile if I blew you in. I could go to the TV stations with the scoop and still be a media star in the end.” She pushed the bridge of her glasses up her nose and stared at Todd.

Todd hoped that she was joking and he decided to assume she was. “Listen,” he said. “Think about what I said. No promises on what would happen, but the offer is sincere.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said. She came over and hugged him and then shoved him toward the door. “I should still be mad at you, you know. Go home before I come to my senses.”

Todd closed the door and left. For the first time in months, he felt good about

the future. He hoped that she would leave with him, wherever he – or they – decided to go, but he knew that at least for him it was time to move on.

14

The world had sucker-punched Matt and he stumbled back two steps. The first blow came when he read the story that claimed The Avenger had murdered someone. It couldn't be true, could it? There had to be more to the story than what was reported. The Avenger must have been threatened. Maybe he had found out that the guy had murdered six other people and this death was in response. Or maybe, Matt thought, the deceased had discovered The Avenger's identity and was blackmailing him. The Avenger couldn't be a common criminal, Matt told himself, he couldn't be. He immediately had wanted to ask Karen if she knew any more than what she had reported.

Which brought him to the second punch, which occurred when he heard about Karen. In a way, he was glad that her firing had happened before his shift started since he didn't think he could have watched her get escorted out of the building. This one was like a left-right combination, since her firing was bad enough, but the concept of her sleeping with someone for information repulsed him. The lips he had kissed had willingly been in contact with Lord knew what body parts of the cop. He shuddered when he thought about it and he could visualize nothing other than Karen naked and

receptive. And worst of all, he wasn't in the picture. He had been so mad at her the night he kissed her; maybe she was right when she had told him that he didn't know who she was. It wasn't that he had wanted to sleep with her – although that certainly had flitted through his mind on more than one occasion – he simply wanted Karen to be his. Not his like the comic books that he kept bagged and stored in the attic, but in a serious relationship of her own volition. He had been so confused, since he was positive that the dinner, and what followed, would be perfect. How could his instincts have been so wrong? He knew he had built the evening up so much that the reality could never have equaled his expectations but had he really been bothering her so much that she felt the need to shatter him? Apparently so. By the following morning, though, all thoughts of anger toward Karen had been replaced with the notion that he had somehow screwed up. He had wanted to apologize, but then The Avenger murder story hit and he hadn't had a chance to talk to her again before she was fired and now he didn't know what to do. A few days had passed, and the longer he waited the more awkward it would be, and now he wasn't sure how to act around her. He wanted to offer whatever support he could, but would she want it? And then there was Todd. His brother had gone from needing a place to stay to leaving a cryptic message saying things were okay after all. Very strange. Maybe he could kill two birds with one stone and swing by Todd's apartment to see how he was and also ask for his advice regarding Karen. At the very least his brother should be impressed that Matt had finally acted on his feelings and kissed her.

It was almost noon when Matt pulled into Todd's complex. He spotted his brother's car in front of the building as he waited for Todd to respond to the buzzer.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Todd it's me, let me in."

The door release opened and Matt walked in and then up the short flight of steps

to Todd's door, which had been left ajar. Matt entered the living room and was stunned to see numerous boxes packed with Todd's belongings.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I'm thinking I might be moving soon," Todd said. "I wanted to get a jump on packing, just in case. That pile over there is getting tossed, so knock yourself out if you see anything you want."

Matt looked at Todd, who appeared in better spirits than he had in weeks. His clothes weren't wrinkled, he had shaved, and he had an alertness in his eyes that had been missing. Something must have happened in the past few days to instigate the change.

"Where might you move to?"

"Haven't decided yet. Could be West, could be South."

Matt thought it a weird way to refer to regions of the city but he didn't press it. He had come over to talk about Karen and that's what he planned on bringing up.

"I have some disturbing news for you," he said.

"Let me guess. Karen slept with one of her sources and got fired?"

"How did you hear?"

"I talked to her yesterday," Todd said.

It figured, Matt thought. He pondered talking to her and Todd actually did it.

"How was she?" he asked.

"How would you expect? She's in a pretty bad state."

Todd wouldn't elaborate, even though Matt was dying for more. He walked over to the pile that Todd had earmarked for chucking. A couple of milk crates were filled with record albums and Matt was amazed Todd would throw these out. Matt had a couple hundred albums of his own stored in the attic, just waiting for the day he either fixed his old turntable or bought a new one. A few of the ones Todd had were

duplicates from his collection but they had made an effort not to buy the same music when they were teens. He flipped through the records and smiled as he saw album covers he hadn't seen in years. The Replacements, the Tubes, the Dead Kennedys, Hüsker Dü. Bands long gone and former heroes doing God knew what. By the time they had moved apart, to college and beyond, CDs had replaced albums in both of their collections. He excused himself to use the bathroom, and after he finished and made his way back to the living room a picture that rested on top of a box of clothes caught his eye. It was of Todd and his parents standing together with Niagara Falls in the background. Matt had never seen this picture before and strangely enough, he wasn't in it. He also had no memory of visiting the Falls at that age. He held the photo in his hand and walked over to Todd.

"I don't remember being on this trip," he said.

Todd took the picture from Matt and looked at it. "That's because you weren't. You were at some kind of summer camp for a week and I think Mom and Dad felt bad for me."

Matt remembered that summer; he was ten and it was a music camp. At that age Matt played the oboe, although by the time he had made it to high school he had given the instrument up. What he didn't remember was Todd telling him what they had done while he was away.

"Was it just for the day?" Matt asked. Niagara Falls could be reached in less than a two-hour drive.

"Yeah, we saw the Falls, went to Ripley's, visited a couple of wax museums. At the time I thought they were cool, but I went back years later and they were so cheesy."

"I always wanted to ride the Maid of the Mist."

"Me and Dad did that. Mom was too scared to take a boat under the Falls so she

just watched.”

More than twenty years had passed and Matt felt bad because he didn’t want them to have had a life while he was gone. And none of them had mentioned it.

“You don’t seem so bitter now when talking about Dad.”

“He wasn’t that bad of a guy, I guess. At the time I was jealous of you for going away and he wanted to make me feel like I was special, too.”

Todd had been jealous of him. Now that was a concept Matt had a hard time believing. He set the picture down and wondered what else had happened that he didn’t know about. Sometimes it seemed as if Todd had this whole other life that Matt was not a part of.

“Did you ever try to find your real dad?”

It was a question Matt had been thinking about almost since the time Todd had told him about what had happened. Matt knew it would have driven him crazy to not know the identity of his father. Todd stopped packing and looked at him.

“I tried for a few months a couple of years ago but I didn’t even have a place to start. Apparently only Mom, Dad and Aunt Janet knew, and once they had all died I had no place to go. I wish I had tried earlier, before Aunt Janet died, but I was angry for too many years.”

“I still don’t know what to say,” Matt said. Todd shrugged and returned to packing. Matt watched his brother for a minute and then his thoughts drifted back to Karen. “Did Karen give any details about what happened?”

“She didn’t tell me what position they used, if that’s what you’re wondering.” Todd stopped and looked at Matt. “Sorry, that was rude. All she said was that she drank too much and felt pressured to get the scoop. This Detective Simmons, I think his name was, apparently led her to believe he knew The Avenger’s identity. Right now she’s trying to figure out what she’s going to do next.”

"I should talk to her," Matt said. Detective Simmons, Simmons, Matt repeated to himself so he wouldn't forget. Todd looked as if he was going to say something and then changed his mind. Matt wondered if Karen had told him about the kiss and slap. Might as well bring it up myself, he thought. "I finally did something about Karen," he said.

"Yeah? What did you do?"

Todd didn't act as surprised as he should have, and Matt guessed that he had heard what happened.

"I kissed her and she slapped the shit out of me."

"I know," Todd said quietly. "I'm glad you did it but I think the result was the best thing for both of you. She really wants you to be her friend without all that baggage hanging over the two of you."

"I prefer not to think of my feelings as baggage."

"You know what I mean."

Matt understood Todd's point but he had spent a couple of years with certain feelings targeted toward Karen and to have them thought of as finally being tossed aside, well that was harsh. He wondered if Todd was happy that he was out of the way and make his own move for Karen. That would piss him off. Matt was pretty sure he could simply be friends with Karen – after all, that's all they had really been – but the first meeting would likely be awkward, at least for him. He looked at his watch and knew he should leave so he could eat before going to work.

"I'm gonna get going. I'm glad to see you're okay; I was worried the other night." He wound his way through the boxes and stopped at the door. "By the way, what do you think about The Avenger being a murderer? I can't believe he would do that."

"Matt, nothing personal, but I'm tired of talking about The Avenger. For all I

care, he can just go away and never be in the news again.”

“I doubt that will happen,” Matt said.

“Don’t be surprised.”

“Like you would know. Listen, let me know if you need help moving, if and when you go.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m going, I just have to figure out where.”

Matt left the apartment and thought about Todd’s last words. It appeared that all of them – he, Todd and Karen – needed to figure out where they were going; if not physically, then at least mentally. As he walked to his car the name Detective Simmons kept echoing through his brain. Although he knew Karen had slept with the guy of her own volition he couldn’t help but think he had taken advantage of her. Where was The Avenger now that someone he knew needed help?

The more Matt thought about it the more he felt the need to do something. Karen might not be interested in him romantically but he could help her as a friend. How would The Avenger handle this, Matt asked himself. He had no training for this sort of activity; he didn’t even know where to begin but he knew it was something he needed to do. For once in his life he wanted to act rather than sit on the sidelines. The Avenger didn’t know about Simmons so Matt would play the part of hero. It wasn’t that difficult to do the initial research – he discovered Simmons’ first name from searching the computer archive of old newspaper articles – the hard part would be to find out where he lived. There was no way a police detective would have his address and phone number listed in the phone book. He had snooped around at work and found out from Alan that Karen had met Simmons at the Delta Club. He figured his first try would be to hang out at the bar and see if Simmons would make another appearance.

Matt had pretended to feel ill so he could get off of his shift a couple of hours early and he made it to the Delta Club by 12:30. He had never been to the bar before and the music that surrounded him as he walked in was enough to convince him he never wanted to be there again. He had always hated most dance music since he prided himself on listening to songs with intelligent, thoughtful lyrics. Repetitive beats and a few words sung ad nauseum for five minutes were not his idea of creative skill. But, he had to admit that the crush of people on the dance floor did not share his opinion. The thing he immediately noticed was that he felt old. This was a hangout for the in or just out of college crowd. He had decided before entering the bar that the best thing to do would be to ask one of the bartenders if they knew who Simmons was. He had to wait for a few minutes to get the attention of one of the two females behind the bar, which was fine because it let his eyes get adjusted to the lack of lighting that appeared to be pervasive throughout the bar. He ordered a cola, and when she brought it he handed her a twenty and asked if she knew Simmons.

“Am I keeping the change?” she asked. When Matt nodded yes, she pointed to the seat at the end of the bar where a man sat leaning against the wall, watching the action on the dance floor.

Matt thanked her and moved away from the bar. He found a spot where he could stand and watch Simmons. Matt saw a paunchy, middle-aged man who was trying to act suave. He couldn't find one stand-out feature that would attract a woman and Matt could not believe that Karen had allowed this guy to hit on her, much less sleep with her. Simmons was possibly the oldest man in the bar but that didn't stop him from talking to any number of women young enough to be his daughter. Matt wondered if the guy sat there until he could convince some increasingly drunk woman,

much like Karen must have been, to leave with him. He watched as Simmons, one arm resting on the edge of the bar, moved a hand down the back of one target until it rested on the woman's butt. Matt anticipated a rebuke of some kind but all she did was laugh and lean in to kiss him. Simmons whispered something to her and got up. He straightened his jacket and began to guide the woman away from the bar. In a way Matt was jealous of Simmons, since he had never been much good at flirting. Even when he was younger he tended to sit at the bar or table and watch the people around him. He never knew what to say, what lines to use that would distinguish him from the others who were on the hunt. Matt set his drink on the nearest table and moved to follow Simmons out of the bar. Just then a girl stepped in front of Matt.

"Do you want to dance?" she asked.

She barely looked old enough to get in the place, Matt thought. But then, the older he got the harder it was for him to distinguish the ages of those under twenty-five. She wore too much make-up and had the big hair common to those living in the suburbs of the west side of the city. There was a pleading look on her face that made Matt wonder how long it had taken her to get up the courage to ask him. But he had no time for dancing; he could see the back of Simmons exiting the place.

"Thanks, anyway," he said. "But I'm just on my way out."

"Sure, no problem," the girl said.

"Really, I have to be someplace." It was more of an explanation than needed and, although it could have been his ego, Matt felt a twinge of guilt because he thought the girl looked crushed. That feeling lasted only for a moment and he quickly left and looked around for Simmons. He decided to try the main parking lot next to the building and to his relief saw Simmons and the woman standing in the lot. They were close enough to Matt's car where he could walk near them without rousing suspicion and he overheard a brief part of their conversation.

"You've drunk way too much for me to let you drive. I am a cop, remember?"

"I have three roommates, I'll call one of them."

"Come on, we'll go to my place for awhile until you sober up."

"I don't want to go with you."

"Bitch," Simmons said, and flung her aside. "What are you looking at?" he said to Matt before he got into his car.

Matt unlocked his door and waited for Simmons to pull out. As he waited he saw the girl talking on a cell phone and he thought it too bad that Karen hadn't put up more of a fight. He followed Simmons as cautiously as he could, hoping that the policeman lived nearby. Luckily, it took less than five minutes to reach Simmons' street. Matt wasn't sure of his game plan – all he had hoped for from the evening was to discover who Simmons was – and he wondered if this was how The Avenger felt before springing into action. The anticipation mixed with fear, not unlike how he felt before a game, although obviously the stakes were much higher now. The funny thing was how calm he felt. A week ago he could never have imagined himself in this situation, but a week ago Karen had her job and had not been taken advantage of. He still couldn't accept that what had happened had been voluntary on Karen's part and he saw himself as a knight defending her honor. And maybe, just maybe, she would change her mind about him when she learned how he had acted.

Simmons turned into his driveway and Matt drove past. He stopped a little ways down the road and as quietly as he could, got out of his car and crept toward Simmons, putting on a pair of driving gloves as he moved. Even though it was dark, Matt saw a decent-sized rock in a neighbor's front yard and he picked it up. Simmons was about to unlock his door when Matt ran up behind him and raised the rock. Simmons must have heard him because he turned at the last second and Matt hit him in the temple. For a big man, Simmons crumpled quickly. The key was in the lock and

Matt opened the door with his gloves still on to avoid leaving fingerprints. He dragged the heavy body off the front step and then took a quick look outside to see if anybody had noticed. The neighborhood was serene – as it should have been at two a.m. – and Matt tried to still his heavy breathing. He stared at the unconscious body lying on the floor, a trickle of blood tracing the path from the door. Simmons didn't look so dangerous now, or attractive for that matter. He wondered what it had been about this guy that Karen had been remotely interested in. A jealous anger began to fill Matt in wave after wave, growing with each pulse of his blood. Those were the hands that groped Karen. Those were the lips she had kissed. Matt unzipped the pants and looked at the boxers that held the crucible of his own pain. He grabbed the elastic band of the shorts and yanked them down. He looked at the shrunken, limp penis that he thought stared back at him. That was the dick that was thrust inside Karen. Matt took a Swiss army knife from his pocket and opened the largest of the blades. He took off one glove and brushed the blade against his thumb and felt confident in the sharpness of its edge. He reached down with his left hand and grabbed the penis below the head. He pulled ever so slightly to stretch it longer and then realized his knife wasn't big enough to do the job without hacking his way through. Matt wanted a clean cut, not a butcher job. He went into the kitchen and searched through a couple of drawers until he found a meat cleaver. Matt felt the heft of the weapon and nodded in acceptance. He returned to the prone body of the detective and resumed his position of dick in hand. He lifted the knife and started to bring his arm down in a slicing motion, only to stop and inch or two from the intended target. He couldn't do it. He could visualize the knife slicing through, blood spurting, the piece of flesh in his hand, so why couldn't he make the cut? He lifted his arm again and suddenly knew that the moment had passed that would have allowed him to gain his revenge on Simmons. He used the knife to draw a little blood from the penis; pricking the prick, Matt thought, and then set the knife on the

floor beside Simmons and walked out the front door, down the driveway and to his car. He had wanted to make Simmons think twice before taking advantage of another woman, and maybe with the cut and the knife beside him, Simmons would conclude the potential horror he had been spared. Matt knew that this would be his one and only foray into avenging and he was okay with that. He no longer held grandiose dreams of being The Avenger and he drove home with the stereo blasting and the driver side window rolled down. He could admit it, he felt good. Even though he hadn't chopped off Simmons' penis, thereby saving an untold number of women from future grief, he had put himself in a position to do so if he had desired. He had literally held someone's fate in his hands. It was almost a purifying feeling, a sense of passing a test or coming through the fire. He felt he had been called upon and he had acted. For once, he had acted.

“Did you know that the word sacrilegious has nothing to do with religion?” Matt asked whoever at the copy desk was listening. This was the sort of knowledge he loved; word histories, where the contemporary meaning came from. “It means to violate something considered sacred, it doesn't necessarily mean something that's against organized religion.”

He was in a good mood tonight. The events of the past few days seemed like the distant past, almost as if they had happened to someone else. Matt had left Detective Simmons' house knowing he had made the right choice. Someone else in that situation would likely have taken the next step and sliced away but that wasn't Matt. He went back to the story he was working on. The big Avenger piece was running tomorrow and he was to take the last next-to-last look at it, before Catherine gave her final blessing. It was strange to read something that had the unmistakable markings of

Karen's best work without seeing her name attached. At first Matt had thought they might kill the story once Karen was fired but they had assigned another reporter to take the mass of information Karen had compiled and make it into something publishable. Most of the story had been in good shape but Matt knew that Karen had not known how the end would work. As with the rest of the city, the paper was taking the angle of what was next; where would The Avenger go from here? After the alleged murder, the tone of the article had to change to something darker. Maybe it was because the reporter assigned to complete the article didn't know The Avenger details inside and out or maybe it was the packaging of the story, sidebars and graphics, but as Matt read the copy, he couldn't help but feel that it sounded a little desperate, a little too much like it was trying to say something big that the actual facts couldn't back up.

"Hey, Matt," Charley called from down the copy desk. "When you're finished, come see me."

Matt took one more pass through the story and then sent his comments to Alan, who would pass them on to Catherine. He walked down to where Charley worked and sat down next to his boss.

"Give me just a second," Charley said. The copy chief finished answering an e-mail and sent it off. "Okay, follow me."

Matt followed Charley out of the newsroom and down the hall. They walked into the paper's library, which housed past news clippings, magazines, and reference books, among other research tools. The three librarians had gone home for the day and Matt and Charley were alone in the room.

"I know it's a busy time of night so I won't keep us long," Charley began. "I wanted to let you know that my wife and I have decided to start our own business and I'll be leaving the paper at the end of the month."

"Wow." Matt was stunned. He had never expected Charley to leave before

retirement; he had always considered his boss a lifer. "What are you going to do?"

"Well, I've always wanted to own a small bookstore and we came across this woman who was looking to get out of the business. She has a great inventory, and I have way too many boxes of books packed away in my attic. I figure I'll carry some new books, mostly used. We found a location in the city that has a lot of foot traffic during the day and I figured, what the hell, I'm 48 and this could be my last chance to try something like this. My wife paints and belongs to an art club and we thought we would have one wall of paintings for sale. And maybe a small selection of greeting cards. But mostly books. I need to be around words in some fashion."

"If that's your dream, then I'm happy for you," Matt said. And he was. What he had yet to understand was why Charley had dragged him into the library to tell him, rather than announce it to everyone at the same time. He wondered if all of the copy editors were getting the same treatment. He didn't have to wait long to find out.

"I wanted to talk to you before I tell the rest of the team," Charley said. "My suggestion is going to be that you become the new Copy Chief. Are you interested?"

"Yes," Matt blurted. For some reason he was being given a second chance and this time he wouldn't hesitate.

"Good. Hold on a second." Charley picked up the nearest phone, punched in an extension and said, "It's a go, come on in."

So this was why the private setting. Then he wondered why he was chosen and not one of the others with more seniority. Again, it seemed as if Charley was reading his mind.

"I'll be honest, Matt. You were not the first person I approached, but the other candidate was happy where he was. And it might not be easy suddenly being in charge of those you have been long-time peers of. But as you know, the desk pretty much runs itself. Hello, Frank."

Matt turned to see Frank Cooper approach. Frank sat down next to Charley and winked at Matt.

“We’ve been here before, haven’t we, Matthew?” Frank said.

“I know we haven’t discussed money or other issues yet, but you’ll be getting a nice little bump in pay,” Charley said. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“This time,” Matt said, directing his comment to Frank. “This time I’m sure.”

“You’ll do fine, Matthew.” Frank said. “Be grateful, though. It’s not everyone who gets a second chance so soon.”

“Now we need your help with this,” Charley said. “Catherine is fine with us offering you the job but you need to keep quiet about it for now. I’m planning on announcing my resignation Monday afternoon at the monthly award meeting, and at that time we’ll introduce you as the new chief.”

“This is a good fit for you,” Frank said. “Reporters might be the soul of the paper but the copy desk is the conscience.”

“That’s very poetic, Frank,” Matt said.

“Thank you. Now, I think I can speak for Charley when I say get back to work. We’ve got a deadline coming up.”

Matt went back to his computer but he couldn’t have told anyone what the articles that he edited were about. His mind was racing and way too many emotions were fighting for space. He knew he had to get through the rest of the shift before he could sit down and process what’d been transpiring. A growling in his stomach made Matt think of food so he began the walk to the vending machines. He wasn’t paying too much attention and was surprised to see Tracey standing in front of the snack machine.

“Hey, Tracey. What are you doing here so late?”

“I was covering the concert at the arena across the street.”

“When I came in for my shift there must have been hundreds of people milling

about, and that was at least three hours before it started. Was it a good show?"

"Yeah."

They stood there in an awkward silence and Matt thought about how it seemed a lifetime ago that the softball game took place, although it had only been six days. So much had happened since then and this was the first time that he had seen her since she had left the bar. She hurriedly slid the coins into the machine, pushed the requisite buttons, and watch as the bag of potato chips got stuck before falling down. Tracey started to shake the machine to no effect.

"Let me help," Matt said.

Together they rocked it enough that the chips finally fell to where Tracey could get them.

"I knew we made a great double-play combo. See you at the game tomorrow," she said, and started to walk past him.

"Tracey?"

She stopped and looked at Matt. Life was treating him well today so he decided to see what other good things could happen.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go out to dinner, or grab some coffee or something one of these nights."

"That would be nice," she said. A smile broke over her face and she blushed in a way that Matt found endearing. "Let's talk about it at the game tomorrow. I'm on deadline right now."

Matt watched her walk away and then turned and bought a candy bar from the machine. He thought it funny how life worked sometimes, but if Fortune's wheel was positioned to favor him, who was he to deny his fate?

The paper had been put to bed and Matt read the West Coast baseball scores from the wires. He was in good spirits and in no hurry to leave the place that was providing the mood. He noticed Charley shutting down his computer and Matt walked over.

“Charley, I just wanted to say thanks.”

“No reason to thank me, Matt. You’ve earned your chance.” Charley yawned and stretched. “I am not going to miss these hours,” he said. “I’ll see you Monday. It should be a big day for both of us.”

“Take it easy,” Matt said.

He turned and noticed that the only other person left in the newsroom was Frank, who motioned Matt to come to his desk. Matt sat down as Frank reached into his drawer and pulled out the bottle of Scotch, most likely a new one by now. Frank poured two glasses and handed one to Matt.

“Drink up, Matthew. This was a good night for journalism.”

15

What to do, what to do. The impetuous side of Karen was telling her to leave town, to make a new start wherever Todd chose. Unfortunately, there wasn't a cautious side to offer an opposing opinion. The guarded side had been off the job since the drinks had started flowing at the Delta Club. But when it came down to it, what did she have to lose? She had no job and no real possibilities of finding anything that suited her. She could probably fall into public relations – that was the road a lot of former journalists took – but she didn't think the life of a corporate flak was for her, at least not yet. Her mom was moving and Karen had no other family in the area to speak of. No friends close enough to keep her here. And the pros of moving were many. She could try and get a reporting job in another city if she decided that she wanted to stay in the business. She had heard that the paper rarely if ever gave bad references; they simply told prospective employers that the person in question was employed from such and such a date. By moving she could get away from the reminders of what went wrong. She could do as so many had done in this country: start over. Karen felt good about her almost-decision. She would sleep on it, and if she felt the same way tomorrow, well then, it might be time to start some serious planning. The buzzer to her

apartment sounded and forced Karen to exit her internal dialogue.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Karen? It’s Mom.”

What was her mom doing here? Karen thought. She never stopped by unannounced. “Come on up,” Karen said.

She held the door-release button long enough for her mom to get in. She looked around the apartment. The place was a wreck, and for that matter, so was she. In all of her worries and concerns of the past few days she had not talked to her mom about what had happened. How do you tell a parent that the reason you got fired – which was hard enough to share – was that you had sex with someone you shouldn’t have? She straightened as much of her living room as she could in ten seconds and then went to open her door.

“Hi, Mom.” She gave her mother a quick hug.

“Hi, honey. I was just in the neighborhood and thought I would swing by.”

Her mother was never just in the neighborhood. She doubted the woman came into the city more than once or twice a year unless she was visiting Karen. She noticed that her mother quickly took in the state of the apartment, as well as that of Karen. Karen looked around as well and saw what her mother must have seen: clothes strewn on the furniture, three empty cups next to empty take-out containers on the coffee table.

“So,” her mom said, dragging out the word. “How have you been?”

“Okay.” Karen didn’t know how to delve into everything that had been happening. “Do you want some coffee?”

“That would be nice, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not a problem,” Karen said. “Let me pop into the kitchen for a minute and get it started. Have a seat, if you can find a spot.” Karen gathered her pajamas, which had been tossed on the sofa earlier in the morning, and tossed them onto her bedroom floor.

She went into the kitchen to start the coffee. She was stalling; she knew it and she knew her mother knew it. She checked the cupboard to make sure there were two clean cups and then went back into the living room.

“I was reading the paper this morning and noticed right away the big story about The Avenger,” her mom said. “It jumped out at me that your name wasn’t listed as the writer. I thought that was your baby?”

Christ, Karen thought, she hadn’t realized that today was Sunday. The days had sort of rolled into each other since she had been fired. Today was the big spread; the day she had hoped would cement her star status. Karen was torn between wanting to see how it had turned out and trying to ignore it completely.

“It is. I mean, it was.” Karen excused herself to go pour the coffee. She stirred in one scoop of sugar and hazelnut creamer for her mom, the same creamer and two scoops for her. She carried the cups back to the living room and decided to get everything out in the open. At least as open as she was willing to go. “I don’t work for the paper anymore.”

“Oh?”

Karen could tell her mom wanted to ask why, wanted to know much more detail about what happened. She found it amazing what you could communicate so much with a two-letter word and the raise of an eyebrow. The silence couldn’t have lasted for more than a few seconds, but in that time Karen felt ready to burst. It would have been easier to blurt everything if only her mom had asked ‘what happened.’ It was so hard to know where to begin. Her mom must have sensed this because she provided an opening.

“Did you leave for another job?”

“Actually, no. Without going into great detail, let’s just say that I did something that the editors frowned upon and the decision was reached that I should leave.”

“Oh.”

The same word, this time accompanied by a down-turned mouth.

“Believe me,” Karen said. “I’m not happy about it and I’m definitely not proud. I just lost my sense of judgement for a short time and it cost me.” She took a sip of coffee and scratched her cat, which had jumped on her lap. “I mean, it’s not like I killed someone, and it wasn’t anything illegal . . .” Karen let the thought drift away and hoped her mom wouldn’t press for more detail.

“Are you okay?”

“More or less. I’m just trying to figure out what to do next.”

“Is there more coffee?”

“Sure, I’ll get it.”

Karen couldn’t remember her mom taking even one sip and here was her empty cup. Before she made it to the kitchen, her phone rang.

“You get the phone, I’ll get the coffee,” her mom said.

“Hello?” Karen said as she handed off the cup.

“Seattle.”

“Todd?”

“Yep. What do you think about Seattle?”

“To be honest with you, I’ve never given Seattle much thought.” The call waiting function beeped in Karen’s ear. “Hey, I’ve got another call.”

“Well, think about it. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Hello?”

“Hey, Karen, it’s Matt.”

Karen guessed she couldn’t have one brother without the other. “What’s going on, Matt?”

“I’m pretty sure I know the answer but I thought I’d ask. You’re not playing

softball today, are you?"

She had not thought about softball since being fired. She had made a commitment, but there was no way in hell she was going to show up and be around all of those people. She didn't like softball that much; she had played more for the social aspect, which would now be a joke.

"Uhm I think I'll pass, Matt. Why don't you plan on me not being there for the rest of the season."

"That's kind of what I thought."

Karen knew that she needed to talk to Matt about her possible move. If she woke up tomorrow still wanting to move then she wanted to be the person to tell Matt, not Todd.

"Hey, Matt. What are you doing tomorrow before work?"

"Nothing that I can think of."

"Can you come over? I need to talk to you."

She heard the gears whir in his brain. She thought he was still thinking about his kiss, whereas that was so far in her past she had already moved on.

"Sure. I'll stop by around two. Is that okay?"

"Sure. See you then."

Tomorrow was shaping up to be another interesting day in what was turning out to be a string of them. Her mom came back from the kitchen and sat down. Karen thought she looked stressed about something.

"Honey, I want you to know that I'm here for you if you want to tell me anything, but I'll respect your privacy as well."

"Thanks, Mom, I appreciate that. I just don't feel like getting into the details of everything right now. Maybe someday, who knows? I do want to ask your opinion about something, though."

“What’s that?”

“Well, I’m thinking of moving,” Karen said.

“But this is such a nice apartment. I thought you loved it here?”

“I do. I mean move to a different city.”

“Is what happened to you that bad?”

“No. I was just thinking it might be a good idea to start a new life somewhere else. Maybe you inspired me.”

“I’m not starting a new life, Karen. It’s more like I’m going back to an old one.”

“However you want to consider it, at least you’re doing something.” Karen stood and started to walk across her living room. “I want to do something. I want someplace new. I want to start over. I guess what I want is another chance.”

“Where would you go?”

“Not Phoenix,” Karen said with a laugh. “I’m not sure. I’ll have to see what Todd comes up with.”

“Todd?”

“You’ve heard me mention him before. He’s the brother of the guy Matt that I work with? That I used to work with.”

“And you’ll be living with this Todd?” Karen didn’t have to search hard to find the disapproving tone.

“No, I don’t think so.” Karen had barely considered the living arrangements. “He wants to go somewhere new as well, and it would be nice to know one person in the new place.”

Her mother rose and took her cup into the kitchen. When she returned she picked up her purse.

“I can’t tell you what you should do, Karen. All I ask is that you really, really

think everything through.”

“I will.” Karen felt the need to hug her mother. She needed a comforting physical contact. “I’ll give you a call soon. Thanks for stopping by.”

“Mother’s intuition. I had a feeling something was wrong. You know, when we brought you home from the hospital I remember thinking that I’d have to worry about you until you moved out of the house. I was wrong; you never stop worrying.”

Karen walked her mother to her car. Her mother started the engine and then rolled down the window.

“Did I tell you I ran into your friend Marci yesterday?”

“No.”

“She’s pregnant again.”

“Really? That’s great.” She hoped she sounded sincere, since for some reason this news bothered her. If her life sucked, the least the rest of the world could do was to keep its status quo. She was so glad, however, that she had forced Simmons to use protection. At least she hadn’t been too drunk to remember to do that. “I’m surprised she hasn’t told me.”

“She said she had tried to call you a few times, but couldn’t get hold of you.”

Not a shock, Karen thought, she had ignored the telephone for the past few days. Karen watched her mother drive away and then she walked down the road and bought a Sunday paper. It would be painful, but she wanted to see how The Avenger piece turned out. She had planned on waiting until she got home to read the article but as she carried the paper, the story jumped out at her from the front page. Alicia’s name was attached. Alicia, who at the bar after softball gave voice to those in open revolt. Karen made another cup of coffee and then settled in the recliner. It was a strange sensation reading your words when they were attributed to someone else. It was so obvious to her the parts that Alicia added – basically, they sucked. Not that Karen could

blame her; after all, it could not have been easy to take something like this over at the last minute without intimately knowing the history. Maybe intimate was the wrong word to use as she thought of Simmons with a cringe. If Karen could be honest, the story wasn't bad but it should not have run. It was missing the strand that would tie everything together, the one that Karen had given up her job to find. She thought of Todd, and again pondered what he had done. He was The Avenger. He was responsible for all of those things that people loved. He had toyed with her and let her kill her career trying to discover his secret. And, self-defense or not, he had killed someone, literally. Did she want to move across the country with him, knowing what he had done? For that matter, did she really know him – or trust him – enough to take that chance? She would see how she felt in the morning.

Karen woke from the first decent night's sleep she had had in a week to thoughts of Seattle. What did she think of when Seattle came to mind? Coffee, rain, Puget Sound, grunge music. She had heard that it was beautiful in that area of the country. You were near the mountains, not far from the ocean. It was the West Coast without being California. Seattle was a much bigger city than Genesee, so there would be more culture, more anonymity, more forgiveness. She felt comfortable that she could make a life there. Her concerns were regarding Todd, since he carried a lot more baggage than she did. Would he spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder, wondering if the police had finally tracked him down? They both needed to find a job but he also had to live with the knowledge he was responsible for someone's death. And he had to move past being The Avenger. Karen still had a hard time believing that Todd was the guy she had chased for months. Could a person really withdraw from that life? Before they left she would have to have a long talk with him about what

caused him to become The Avenger. He obviously had some issues that might still need to be worked out. And they would have to come to terms with their own relationship. Would Todd hold any expectations of her if she agreed to go? What did *she* want? Karen rolled out of bed and tramped into the kitchen to make coffee. Her cat rubbed against her leg, waiting to be fed.

“You could have fresh salmon every day in Seattle,” Karen told the cat.

She knew she had issues to work out as well. It wouldn’t be easy for her to just pick up and pretend the past few weeks hadn’t happened. There were a few things Karen had discovered about herself that she didn’t like so much, concerns of her own to figure out. Could two somewhat damaged people successfully make a new start? The answer that had been in her mind since she woke up was: what’s the harm in trying? She and Todd would have the same issues if they stayed in Genesee, but her thinking was it would be harder here. Before she talked herself out of anything, she picked up the phone and called Todd. She must have woken him because his ‘hello’ was barely recognizable.

“I’m in.”

“What?”

“I’m Seattle-bound.”

“Great.” Karen could visualize him sitting up, waking up. “This will be good for us, Karen.”

“I guess we’ll have to see. Listen, I want to be the one to tell Matt. He’s coming over today before he goes to work. Call me tonight.”

She hung up and immediately had doubts. “You’ll be okay, you’ll be okay,” she kept telling herself. Maybe she would go to the library to learn a little about Seattle, since she had a few hours to kill before Matt came over. That promised to be an interesting conversation.

Karen knew that this was going to be hard. Not only had she spurned Matt's affections and advances, now she was about to tell him that she was leaving town – with his brother. Memories of the past few years flew across Karen's internal eye. She thought of dinners with Matt and beers emptied and arguments over journalism. She remembered how he had always wanted more than friendship from her and maybe that was why she would not supply what he wanted. Her belief was that Matt didn't want her, not the actual blood-and-boned Karen, he wanted the ideal that he believed her to be. He had never allowed the relationship to slowly evolve into something that could result in love. From the first he had wanted it all, never bothering to discover what that included. And now he stood across the living room from her. He moved to the chair that he thought of as his, the one that now creaked when Matt sat down, as if to say it was tired of bearing this burden.

"Matt," she said. "We need to talk."

"I know," he said, too quickly. "I'm sorry about what I did the other night."

The reminder of Matt's kiss made it seem like it had happened a year ago. So much had taken place since then that Karen knew she was a different person now. Not better, definitely not wiser, just different.

"Matt, I'm moving."

"You too? Something must be in the water. Did you know that Todd was thinking of moving as well?"

"I know." She decided that the best thing to do would be to stop sidestepping the issue and get it out there. "Matt, Todd and I are leaving together. We're going to Seattle."

She looked for a reaction, anything to let her know that he had heard and

acknowledged what she had said. Instead, he reached down and scratched Karen's cat between its ears.

"Did you hear me?"

Finally, Matt looked at her. Karen thought she saw a resigned expression on his face, almost a smirk, but his eyes weren't laughing.

"I heard you."

"And?"

"And what? What can I possibly say? That Todd, as usual, got what I had wanted? How long has this been going on?"

"First of all, Todd doesn't have anything. Nothing has been going on and we are moving as two individuals, not as a couple." Karen knew that Matt would not like the news but it still pissed her off that he turned it around so he came out the victim.

"This was never a competition between you and Todd. If anything, you should feel good that it's not you who's moving."

"How do you figure," Matt asked.

"Why do you think we're going, Matt?" He opened his mouth but she didn't give him time to respond. "We're going because the two of us have screwed up our lives so much that we feel we have to leave in order to get back on track. I don't want to be reminded of my mistakes every time I look at the paper, or pass a bar, or see a policeman I know. And Todd has his own issues he needs to come to terms with. You, on the other hand, other than letting your infatuations wallow for far too long, have your head on fairly straight."

Karen took a couple of deep breaths to try and calm down. Why did she let Matt get her so worked up? She didn't have to answer to him, wasn't held accountable to him in any way. She knew it had to bother him but she so wanted him to understand that he wasn't the reason for any of this, that he, as much of a spectator toward life as

he tended to be, was okay. She and Todd were the ones she was worried about.

“By the way,” Matt said, unwilling to look at her. “Charley MacBride is leaving the paper and they asked me to be the new Copy Desk Chief.”

“Matt, that’s great. Did you say yes?”

“Yup.”

“Congratulations. See? Here is where you’re meant to be. Now all you need to do is ask Tracey out and your life will be great. But if you do, do me a favor and don’t obsess. Treat her as a real person and give it a chance.”

Karen thought she saw a hint of a smile pass over Matt’s face but she couldn’t decide what it would be for.

How will Todd ever know what it was she wanted? Did she want – like the soft murmurs of a stream rushing past, out of sight behind the trees – to simply know he was there? She felt like Matt, because here it was the idea she wanted, not the reality. She didn’t know what the reality would hold, if it would hold anything or simply act like a sifter, keeping the big chunks separated while allowing the fine particles to flow into the bowl to be used while the rest was cast aside. She didn’t want to be tossed aside but she didn’t want to be used, either. What else was there? Maybe it was enough to hold someone, to feel the heat coming through the clothes like a fever felt when kissing the forehead of a child. But as much as Todd didn’t know what she wanted, she felt the same about him. Did he want her or someone he knew that could hold him to the earth, to allow him to, if not forget, at least live with the knowledge that he had taken a person’s life? She didn’t know if she could live with that knowledge. And maybe that knowledge would be something that would keep them from ever making it work, whatever *it* was. They both knew that he had killed someone, and more

importantly, they both knew that he was capable of it. To know that someone could exceed certain limits that you yourself could not imagine, well, that was a sobering thought. She would go with him, she knew at least that much, but after they reached wherever it was they would go, she could make no promises after that. And unlike Matt, she knew that Todd would not ask anything more of her. Life was funny sometimes, she thought. You think you're heading one way, that the path ahead is beckoning and well lit, and then you find it weed-infested and impassable. So you turn around and try a different way, hoping that this time you'll reach your destination. So who cared if this was a boondoggle she was about to depart on? In the end, she had found The Avenger – now all she needed to do was figure out what to do with him.